

OBAMA: HISTORIANS JUDGE HIS FIRST YEAR

ANNUAL
THE
**STATE OF
THE UNION**
ISSUE

the Atlantic

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010 THEATLANTIC.COM

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And The
Civil War**

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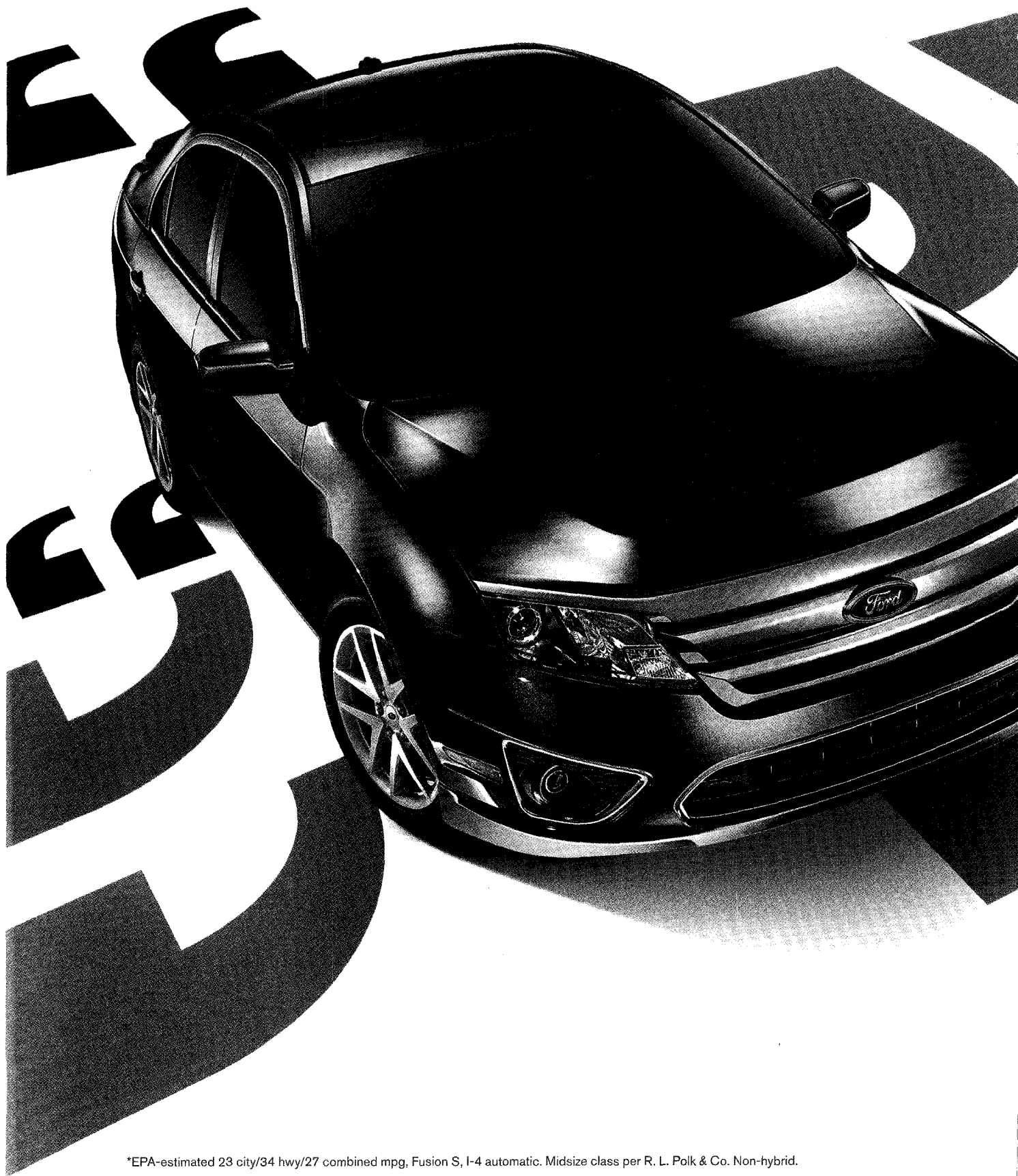
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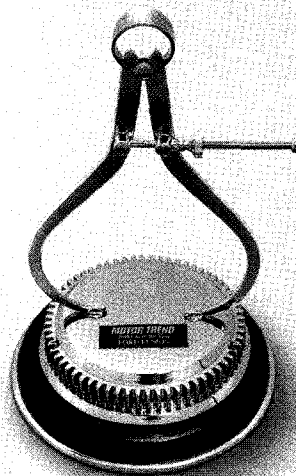
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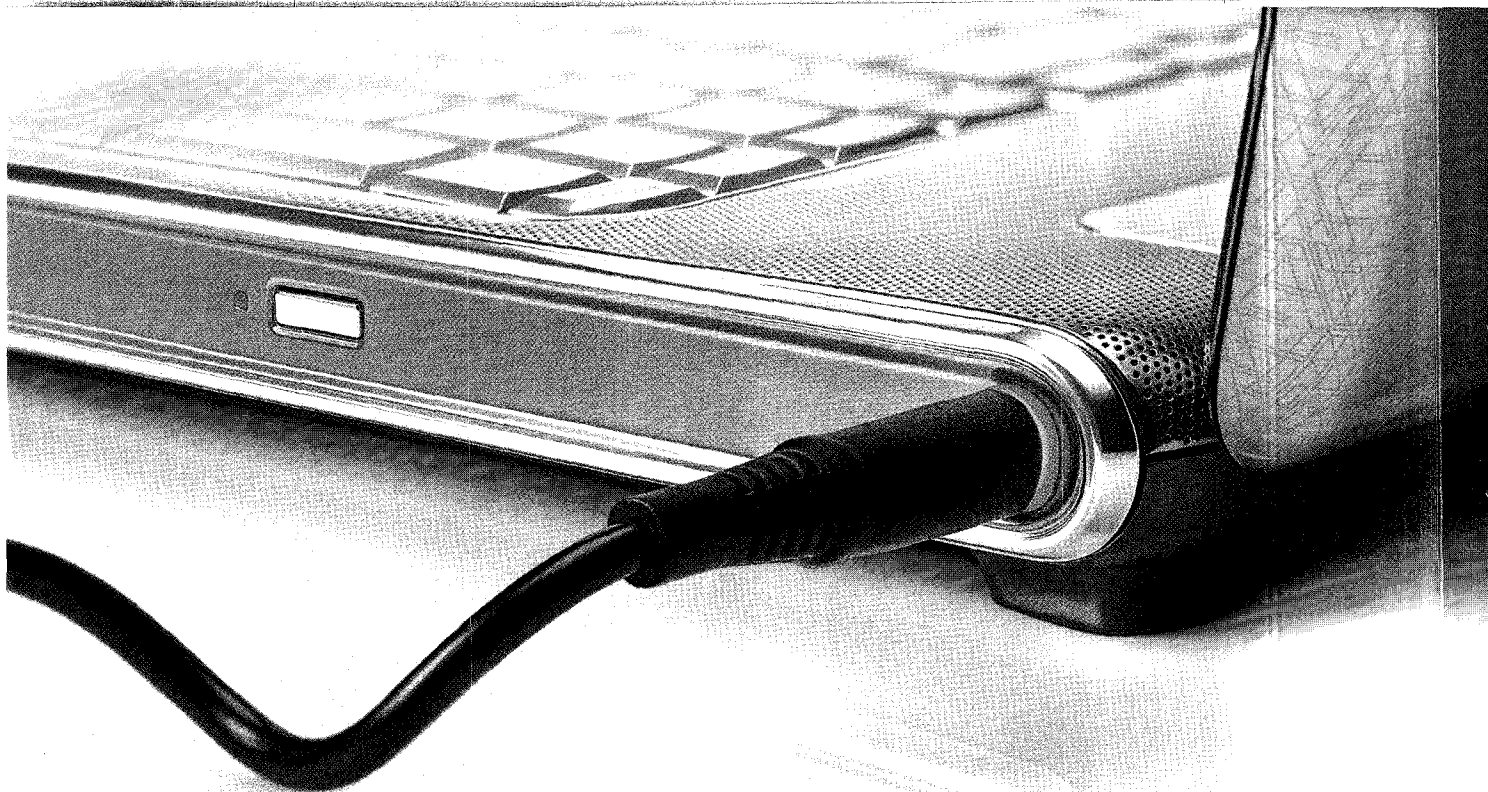
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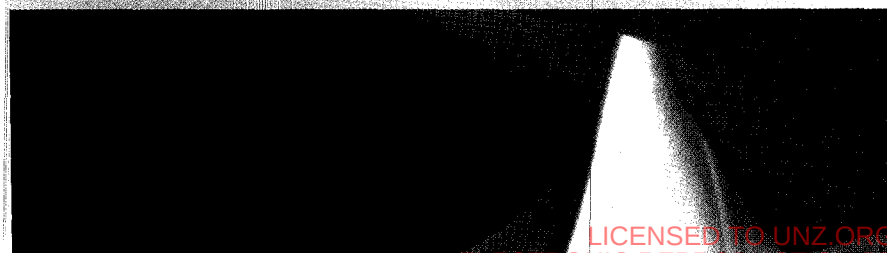
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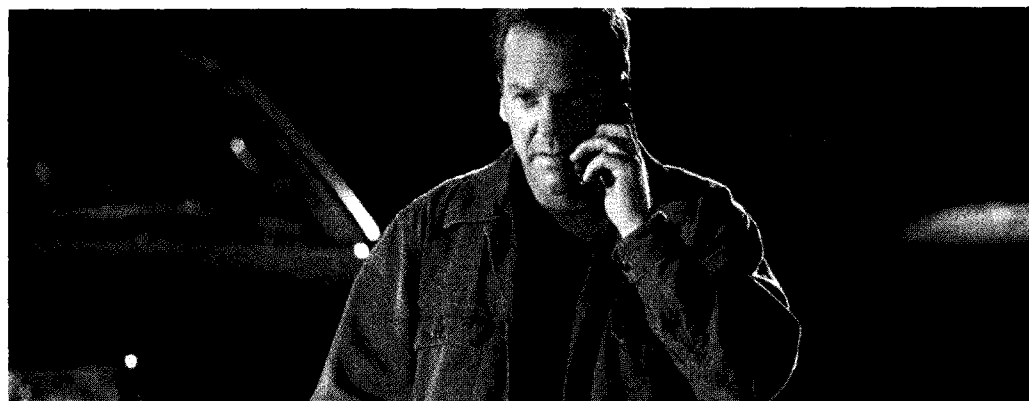
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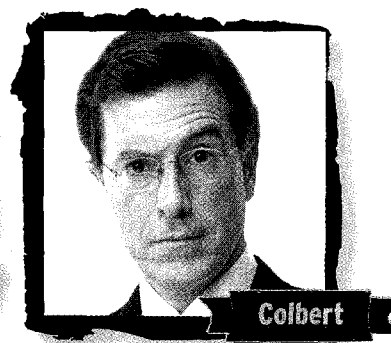
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Andrew Sullivan, Marc Ambinder, and other Atlantic Voices provide real-time commentary on Obama's address before Congress.



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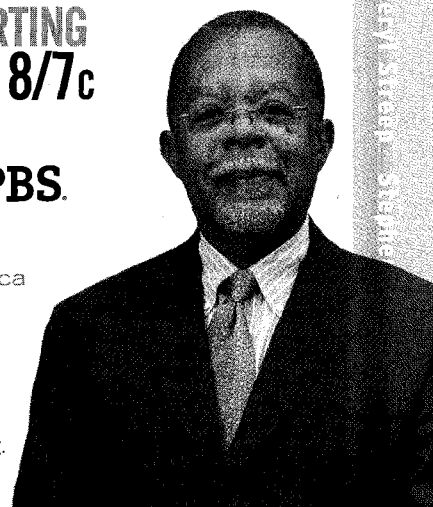
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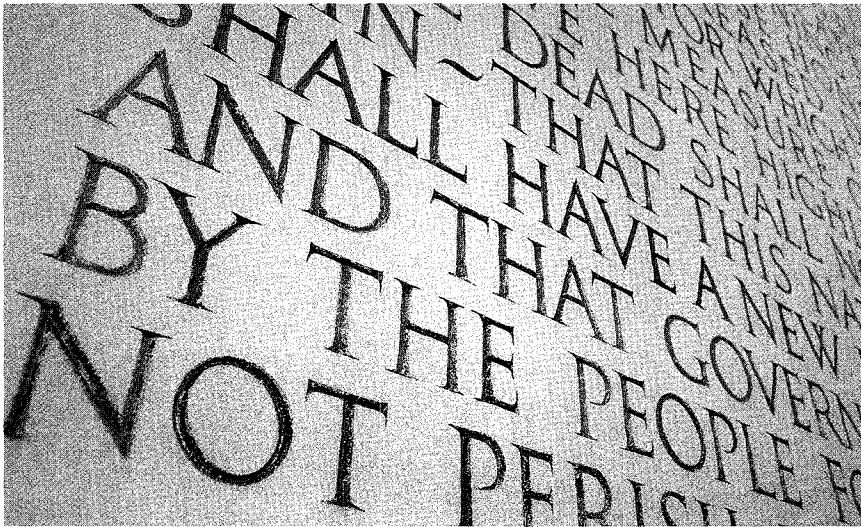


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The State of the Union

*Immense Numbers of Visitors
Oration by Hon. Edward Everett—
Speeches of President Lincoln,
Mr. Seward and Governor Seymour*

SO READ THE headline in *The New York Times* after the Gettysburg Address, lumping Lincoln's speech with two others given the day before his. Other reactions to the president's remarks divided along predictable partisan lines, and even his own personal secretaries, John Hay and John Nicolay, in their eventual biography of the president, devoted more attention to Everett's address than to Lincoln's. With the words still hanging in the air, it's a lot more straightforward to note the crowd size than to guess the possible consequences, and it's a lot easier to score political points than to judge whether the world might long remember what was said there, and who said it better. If you had to write a headline, you'd surely go with the guy who spoke for two hours (Everett), over the one who spoke for maybe three minutes.

The judgments of history may seem inevitable once we're reared upon them, but they are slow to harden. Surely there's no more simultaneously hubristic and plaintive claim for any contemporary act than that it is "historic," though politicians, and journalists, rely

on that adjective like, well, a bad simile. A habit of our time is to see not too little history but far too much of it—in the hour's shouted headline about the gob-smacking hiccup in the stock market, the threatening frivolity of the White House social office, the truly terrible explosion in Pakistan. And yet in these times—during the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, after the election of the first black president, with America fighting two seemingly endless wars, with new global powers on the rise—you don't have to be a hysteric, or a Twitter addict, to suspect that history is hard at work. Whether from Johnson, Roosevelt, or Lincoln, our leaders are struggling to extract the right lessons, even as they try to shape history themselves.

We set out, in our eighth annual State of the Union issue, to fit our time into the longer national story, searching for parallels with the past and a clearer picture of the challenges ahead. Given the strain on the international institutions that the United States built after World War II, David M. Kennedy sees a need, and an opening, for Barack Obama to reunite traditional American realism and idealism in foreign policy. In our politicized news media, Paul Starr glimpses, along with considerable dangers, a chance for greater participation in a reenergized "fighting public sphere." That same political

truculence reminds David Frum of the "strangely empty fury" of the 1880s, which ultimately midwifed an effective government-reform movement. And the year-end chorus of criticism that Obama had betrayed his promise of transformation puts David Greenberg in mind of a pattern that stretches at least as far back as Lincoln, and that suggests that any judgments about the arc of this young administration are woefully premature.

All of these pieces lend context to James Fallows's pursuit of the question that has preoccupied him since he moved home from China last year: Is America going to hell? It is this fear of American decline, I think, that leads so many of us to suspect we have now reached one of history's hinges. As Fallows notes in our cover story, even though "declinism" has been a hallmark of American political culture since the Massachusetts Bay Colony, we should not be lulled into assuming that this time the declinists are wrong. From dozens of interviews, Fallows concludes that most of the sources of America's resilience remain strong, save one—its politics. Fallows, long an optimist about the potential of government, now sees a system of governance that "increasingly looks like a joke." If we do not want to choose decline, this is a problem we have no option but to struggle against.

In his masterful history *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, Garry Wills marshals many reasons to explain why we remember Lincoln's few words, not Everett's many. Among them is that Lincoln was not obsessed with the past. It was Everett who invoked Pericles, but Lincoln who equaled him. "Classicism of Everett's sort looks backward; but the classic artifact sets standards for the future," Wills writes. "Pericles rejected the notion that his predecessors had done more than his own generation. It was the challenge of the moment that both Pericles and Lincoln addressed."

Let's hope that Barack Obama is capable of delivering a similar summons, and that our polarized polity, and our ironized culture, can still rise to it.

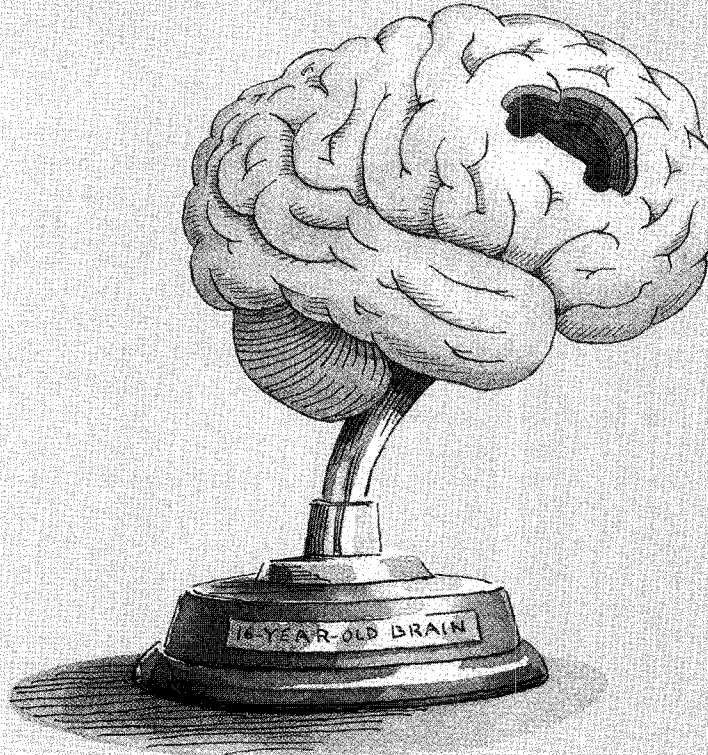
—James Bennet

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Why do most 16-year-olds drive like they're *missing a part of their brain?*



BECAUSE THEY ARE.



Even bright, mature teenagers sometimes do things that are "stupid." But it's not really their fault. It's because their brain hasn't finished developing.

The missing part is called the dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex, and it plays a critical role in teens' decision-making and understanding of future consequences. Problem is, it doesn't fully develop until their 20s. **This is one of the reasons why 16-year-old drivers have crash rates three times higher than 17-year-olds and five times higher than 18-year-olds.**

Car crashes kill more than 4,000 teens every year. And injure nearly 400,000. Is there a way for teens to get their driving experience more safely? Is there a way their brains

can be given the time to mature as completely as their bodies? Allstate thinks so.

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The STANDUP Act* (H.R. 1895) creates a National Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) law that would give teens on-the-road experience gradually while helping them avoid risky conditions. **When states have implemented comprehensive GDL programs, the number of fatal crashes among 16-year-old drivers has fallen by almost 40%.**

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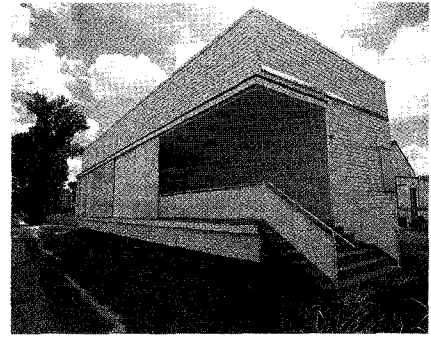
* The STANDUP Act is the Safe Teen And Novice Driver Uniform Protection Act of 2009.

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Sources: National Science Teacher Association, 2007; U.S. Department of Transportation National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2007; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007 and 2008

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



THE FLU-SHOT DEBATE

"Shots in the Dark," by Shannon Brownlee and Jeanne Lenzer (November *Atlantic*), is a danger to public health and a disservice to readers. I'm confident that Dr. Tom Jefferson was selectively quoted. His own published article concludes that in young adults the efficacy of vaccine against flu is 80 percent when the strains in the vaccine are well matched with the circulating virus. The H1N1 vaccine is well matched with the epidemic virus, and it is precisely children and young adults in whom the virus is causing disease and death.

Everyone in public health knows that, owing to senescence of the immune system, influenza and other vaccines are less effective in the old than in the young. However, another published analysis by Dr. Jefferson states that in homes for the elderly, flu vaccine reduces pneumonia by 46 percent and death by 42 percent, whereas in the elderly living in the general community it prevents 26 percent of hospital admissions for pneumonia and reduces mortality from all causes by 47 percent.

Your readers should ignore the inaccurate advice in the article and take advantage of vaccination.

STANLEY A. PLOTKIN, M.D.
EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF PEDIATRICS
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA
DOYLESTOWN, PA.

Have these vaccines been tested for efficacy using a randomized, placebo-controlled methodology, or haven't they? The authors and several of the medical experts they interviewed seem to imply that the vaccines have not undergone rigorous efficacy tests of any kind, yet a cursory look at the relevant medical

literature reveals a number of peer-reviewed papers that certainly appear to be evaluations of vaccine efficacy using a randomized, placebo-controlled design. So, can we lay folk have an answer, once and for all?

JOSH MINER
LA CROSSE, WIS.

Shannon Brownlee and Jeanne Lenzer reply:

We checked with Tom Jefferson to see if he felt we quoted him "selectively," and he told us: "The Atlantic piece is an accurate reporting of both my work and my current thinking." Although the studies he reviewed did show some benefit in terms of reducing the incidence of flu in healthy adults, Jefferson also concluded that there is "insufficient evidence to assess [vaccines'] impact on complications." The elderly and the infirm suffer the serious consequences of flu, but vaccines don't tend to protect them (since they often can't mount an antibody response to the vaccine). This leads Jefferson and several other top experts we interviewed to conclude that further, high-quality studies are in order.

We agree with Stanley Plotkin that in nursing homes, vaccines do appear to offer a sort of "cocoon of protection" when the staff as well as the residents are vaccinated. However, Plotkin appears not to recognize that the claim that vaccines reduce all-cause mortality by 47 percent simply isn't plausible (in part because flu and its complications cause only 10 percent of winter deaths among the elderly).

In response to Josh Miner's question, the answer is yes—and no. Such studies generally examine antibody response or flu symptoms, rather than the serious question most people care about: Does

flu vaccine prevent pneumonia or death for those most at risk of those outcomes? Healthy young adults and children are at low risk of hospitalization or death from flu. Committing them to ongoing risk, however low, in order to protect another sector (the elderly) is something that deserves both serious scientific scrutiny and public discussion.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE CRASH

Hanna Rosin's "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?" (December *Atlantic*) contained some well-researched, objectively presented facts that startlingly link what is known as the "prosperity gospel" to the wave of foreclosures in the economic downturn. I don't take issue with the content of the article itself, but as a Christian I am strongly offended by the implications of the title. The doctrine that God wants all of his followers to be rich is false doctrine, pure and simple. Such teachings are in direct contradiction with scripture, as are the preachers who teach such principles.

There are passages in the Bible that speak directly about wealth, but they do so in an entirely different context. Jesus spoke of people using wealth to further the kingdom of God by giving it to those in need. The account of the rich ruler (Luke 18:18–30) puts this teaching into practice when Jesus asks the rich man to sell all his belongings and give the money to the poor. The man was sad because of his misplaced love for his wealth. I imagine if anyone asked preachers such as Joel Osteen or Fernando Garay to do as Jesus asked the rich ruler, their reaction would be one of similar despair. Jesus taught, in Luke 6:20–26, "Blessed are the poor,"

MARK PETERSON/REDUX; QUICKHONEY; CHRIS GRANTEN/GETTY IMAGES

not "Blessed are those who flaunt their Mercedes Benz to their congregation." This is not to say that Jesus despised wealth, but rather despised how men often hoard their wealth instead of providing for those in need (Luke 21:1-4).

RYAN BAREFOOT
KISSIMMEE, FLA.

MEXICO'S WAR ON DRUGS

I read Philip Caputo's "The Fall of Mexico" (December *Atlantic*) with concern. The government of Mexico recognizes the seriousness of the challenges posed by organized crime. For too long, drug syndicates were given a free hand to corrupt law-enforcement agencies, terrorize honest judges, and kill or buy the silence of journalists and of others who tried to stop the traffickers from supplying drugs to the U.S. market.

However, by confining his analysis to only one of Mexico's 32 states and failing to interview law-enforcement officials or others directly engaged in President Felipe Calderón's unprecedented effort to defang the trafficking organizations, Mr. Caputo is guilty of exactly the sins he accuses other journalists of committing: using "simple story lines" based on rumor, incomplete information, and interviews that serve only to confirm his dark vision, to raise the alarmist specter of a military coup or of Mexico becoming a failed state. Mexico simply does not fit the pattern of a failed state, and it is time serious and thoughtful magazines like *The Atlantic* debunked simplistic media myths or spaghetti-western-like narratives of the challenges Mexico faces today.

ARTURO SARUKHAN
AMBASSADOR OF MEXICO TO THE
UNITED STATES

Philip Caputo replies:

I did not go to Mexico with any preconceived ideas, as Ambassador Sarukhan asserts. The realities I saw there darkened my vision. Approximately 16,000 Mexican citizens have been murdered in the past three years. That's no "spaghetti western" screenplay; that's a fact. Complaints about human-rights violations committed by law-enforcement and military authorities (kidnappings,

assassinations, etc.) have increased six-fold in the same period.

As to Sarukhan's complaint that I confined my analysis to only one state, I'll make two points. First, the current epicenter of the violence is the state of Chihuahua. In 2009 alone, more than 2,300 people were murdered in Juárez, its largest city. As of late November, the homicide rate in Juárez was 153 murders per 100,000 people, making it the bloodiest city in the world. This despite the presence of thousands of army troops and federal police, some of whom, as I reported, have committed crimes themselves. Second, the butchery is by no means confined to Chihuahua, but occurs nationwide. Had my analysis expanded to other regions, the picture would have been even darker than the one I presented.

BLAND THINKING

Number of women listed by *The Atlantic* among the 27 brave thinkers in its November feature on that topic: four. Number of nonwhite males: four. Number of nonwhite women: zero. Number of *Atlantic* editors listed by this reader as able to make a brave, unbiased selection of new thinkers: zero.

BRIGETTE DE LAY
DAKAR, SENEGAL

POST-CRASH SUSTAINABILITY

As a sustainability advocate, I was inspired by Wayne Curtis's article ("Houses of the Future," December *Atlantic*) describing the various home-building techniques New Orleans is applying. The energy-efficient, small-

footprint houses are simple in design yet boast advances in power management and owner involvement. In cities like Cleveland, this is not the case. The nation's financial crisis has hit hardest here, sweeping thousands of houses into foreclosure and inevitable abandonment. The houses still standing are, by and large, stripped of any plumbing or electrical system and often harbor drug addicts or homeless individuals. Most of these houses will be crushed and thrown in a landfill.

There is another option: with the help of visionary community leaders and progressive nonprofit organizations, some houses will be carefully "deconstructed" and recycled. I can't help but think that some new, model neighborhoods springing up in storm-torn New Orleans could benefit from the sustainable building materials Cleveland's older houses can provide. Framing lumber cut 120 years ago is much stronger than new wood and feels more robust, while reclaimed flooring has a rich history and patina unmatched by new hardwoods. This vintage building material defines the idea of carbon neutrality, and Cleveland's once proud houses can continue being houses—not just another layer in a landfill.

ADAM C. SMITH
CLEVELAND HEIGHTS, OHIO

CORRECTING THE RECORD

The bizarre caricature of Arthur Koestler that Christopher Hitchens has substituted for a review of my biography ("The Zealot," December *Atlantic*) is Hitchens's responsibility, not mine, but

Log

2009'S MOST-READ ARTICLES
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1. "What Makes Us Happy?"
Joshua Wolf Shenk, June
2. "The Quiet Coup"
Simon Johnson, May
3. "How American Health Care Killed My Father"
David Goldhill, September
4. "How the Crash Will Reshape America"
Richard Florida, March
5. "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off"
Sandra Tsing Loh, July/August

MOST-RESPONDED-TO
ARTICLES OF 2009

1. "The Case Against Breast-Feeding"
Hanna Rosin, April
2. "How American Health Care Killed My Father"
David Goldhill, September
3. "The End of White America"
Hua Hsu, January/February
4. "Dear President Bush"
Andrew Sullivan, October
5. "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off"
Sandra Tsing Loh, July/August

his blithe indifference to facts should not go unchallenged.

It's not true—and I did not write—that Koestler had “fond memories” of the 1919 Communist putsch in Hungary, nor that he felt “nostalgia for Béla Kun.” Koestler's fond memories and nostalgia were reserved for Count Mihali Károlyi, who headed the first Hungarian Democratic Republic in 1918 after the collapse of the Hapsburg monarchy at the end of World War I. Béla Kun overthrew Károlyi's government in his putsch of 1919, and Kun's anti-Semitic forces chased Koestler and his family out of the country. It would be even odder than Hitchens thinks if Koestler were to feel nostalgia for such a man.

It's also not true that Koestler was “a dedicated agent of the Comintern” in Spain. He was a comparatively junior member of the German Communist Party in Exile, a reporter for the *News Chronicle*, and a secret propagandist for Willi Münzenberg (who was an agent of

the Comintern). The executions Koestler overheard while in a Spanish jail were carried out in Seville, not Málaga.

Hitchens describes Koestler during the 1948 war for Israeli independence as “initially taking the side of the Menachem Begin ultranationalists but eventually becoming sickened by the violence of the Zionist right and finally worrying whether there should be a Jewish state at all,” which is a perverse misreading of what actually happened. When Koestler arrived in Palestine, he had good connections with both David Ben Gurion's left-wing Labor Party and Menachem Begin's right-wing Irgun. Finding the two at dangerous loggerheads over how to fight the war, Koestler pleaded with Ben Gurion and Begin to forget their differences and form a coalition, and also tried (and failed) to persuade the more extreme Stern gang to drop its terrorist methods. He never doubted the necessity of a Jewish state, nor denied its right to exist, but simply

made it clear that he didn't want to live in such a state himself.

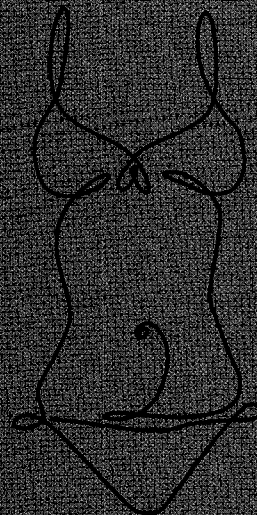
MICHAEL SCAMMELL
NEW YORK, N.Y.

Christopher Hitchens replies:

Michael Scammell seems to have forgotten the distinction between Károlyi and Kun. As his own book puts it, “In March 1919 a Communist dictatorship took over from Károlyi, with Béla Kun as its de facto head,” and on the ensuing May Day, “following Soviet practice, the whole of Budapest was turned into a gigantic fairground ... Arthur accompanied his cousin Margit Aldor to some factory meetings and started reading the Red Gazette ... Fond memories [emphasis mine] of that turbulent spring were to persist well into Arthur's adulthood, exercising a strong influence on his later decision to join the Communist Party.” How could that be clearer? As Scammell goes on to say: “Béla Kun was a Jew. More than half his ‘People's Commissars’ were

Removing a kidney
through a tiny incision
in the belly button.

Going out
through an inny.

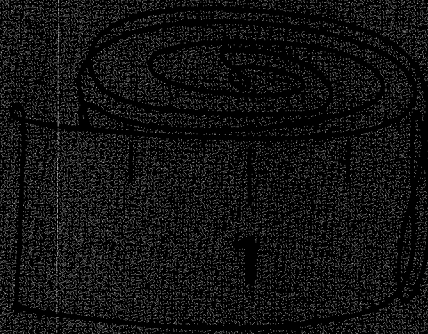


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Jews." It was precisely the anti-Semitic backlash against Kun, and Communism and liberalism, that drove the Koestler family to flee Budapest for Vienna.

I did not say that Koestler was a senior agent of the Comintern. I said he was a dedicated agent of it. His boss, Münzenberg, was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Comintern, as Scammell concedes. In 1975, when Time wrote that Koestler had once "taken orders from Moscow," he declined the suggestion that he defend himself and wrote: "When I was a correspondent in the Spanish Civil War I did indeed follow the instructions of the Communist propaganda apparatus."

Koestler was in several of Franco's jails but, as Scammell writes: "Nationalists' reprisals were carried out not only on the beaches and streets of Málaga but also in the prisons. From his solitary cell, Koestler heard the nightly roll call of

condemned men and listened to the melancholy shuffle of dragging feet as up to fifty prisoners ... were hustled down the corridors to meet their end."

Scammell also writes, about Koestler's admittedly fluctuating attitude toward the Zionist right, that his novel *Thieves in the Night* contains a "conditional defense of terrorism" comparable to "Soviet (and Stalinist) arguments" and that "when it came to Jewish affairs, he tended to lose his moral bearings, perhaps blinded by a sentimental loyalty to Jabotinsky and the Revisionist fervor of his youth." Later, in *Promise and Fulfillment*, Koestler was to agree with Chaim Weizmann's comment that "the Jews' very existence was the fundamental cause of anti-Semitism" and to argue, "The only way to end it was for Jewry outside Israel to cease to exist." (!) After battling this and other contradictions, as Scammell records,

"Koestler seemed to think he might at last get free of his Zionism."

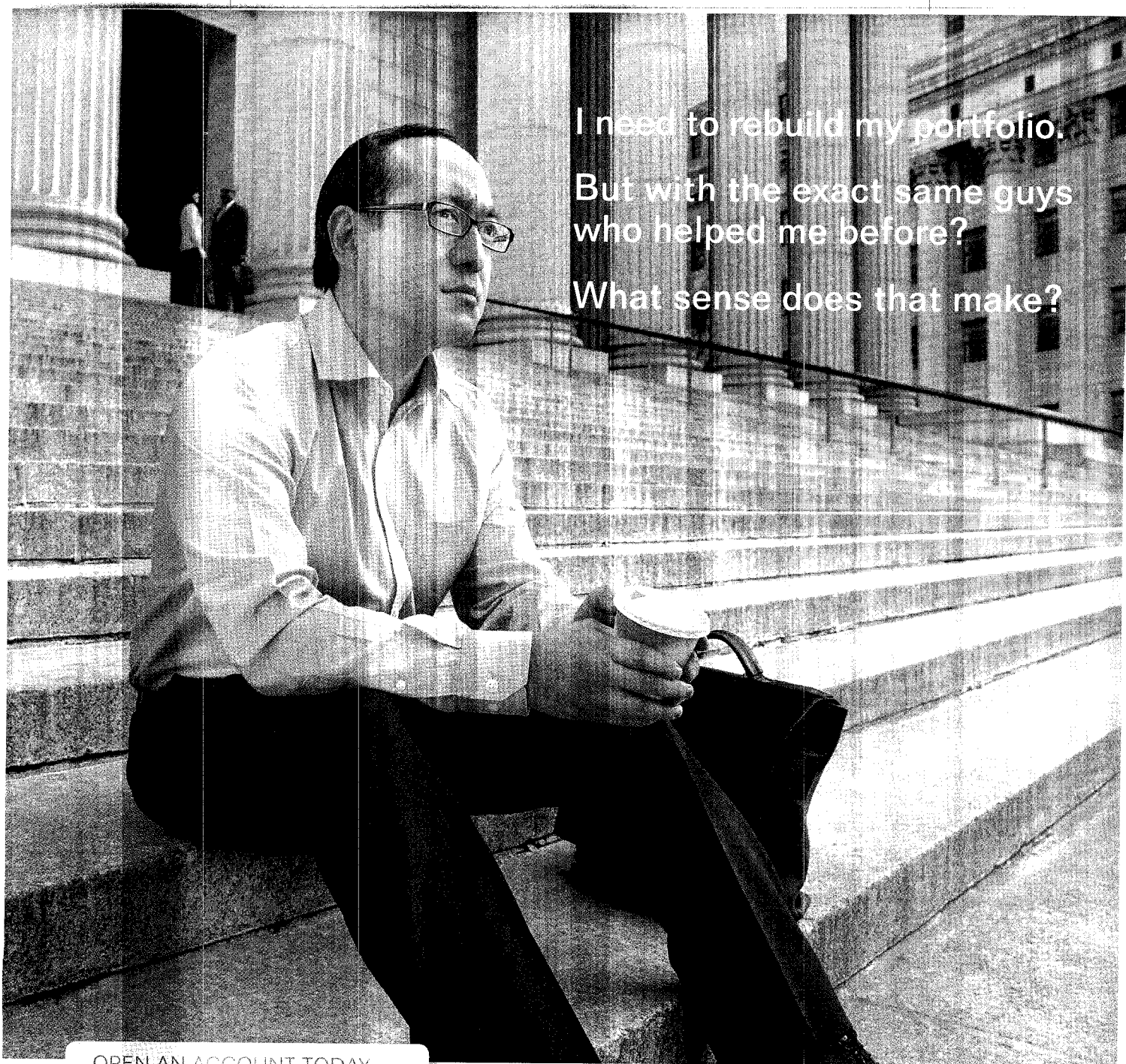
Can it be that I have read Scammell's book with more attention than he gave to compiling it?

Corrections and Clarifications

Sandra Tsing Loh's "On Being a Bad Mother" (December *Atlantic*) mistitled Ayelet Waldman's book. The book is called *Love and Other Impossible Pursuits*. "Shots in the Dark," by Shannon Brownlee and Jeanne Lenzer (November *Atlantic*), misidentified the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The Huffington Post employs eight reporters, more than indicated in the "Brave Thinkers" profile of Arthur Sulzberger Jr. (November *Atlantic*).

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DISPATCHES

IRAN Graeme Wood experiences the happy docility of Iran's most religious city.

THE MILITARY Brian Mockenhaupt boots up the Army's new tactical tool—SimCity Baghdad.

MEDICINE Elizabeth Chiles Shelburne on South Africa's struggle against drug-resistant tuberculosis

BUGS Jim Giles visits an Arizona laboratory determined to drive beetles crazy.

HISTORY Ta-Nehisi Coates finds himself at the front lines of the Civil War's latest battle.

DRINK Wayne Curtis on 86-ounce cocktails, buxom barware, and the myth of the three-Martini lunch

TRAVEL Lynn Yaeger chances on marijuana-leaf bracelets and a stiletto-heeled ibex in the Paris arcades.

TECHNOLOGY William Gurstelle unlocks the creative potential of "physical computers" for everybody.



IRAN

Among the Mullahs

IN QOM, THE SITE OF IRAN'S SECRET URANIUM-ENRICHMENT FACILITY, THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION REMAINS AS STRONG AS EVER.

By Graeme Wood

BEFORE LAST FALL—when the Iranian government revealed it had hollowed out a nearby mountain, and was planning to enrich uranium there—the most prominent site in Iran's Qom province was the Shrine of Fatima al-Masumeh. Minutely tiled in blue and

green, with mirrored tessellations that make it sparkle in the night, the shrine contains the body of the sister of one of the 12 revered imams of Shiite Islam. Along with the nearby Feyzieh madrasa, the most distinguished center of Shiite learning in the world, the Masumeh

shrine has attracted to Qom a population pleased with clerical rule, and made it Iran's most religious city and the seat of the mullahs' power. That's why Qom seemed like an utterly predictable location for the nuclear project when the revelation came in September, during my visit there.

In the protests this summer following Iran's presidential election—in which the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, claimed a much-disputed victory over the reformist candidate, Mir-Hossein Moussavi—Tehran became the obsession of the Twitterverse:

no one could be sure what was happening on the streets, but stray messages and videos escaped here and there, and amounted, darkly, to rumors of revolution. But Qom responded somewhat differently. This was the Iran that remained not only un-Twittered but without any desire to Twitter, that was content with things as they were already, and perhaps as they were quite a long time before that, too.

Iranians I met in Tehran had suppressed snickers when I told them my itinerary included several days among the mullahs. It was as if a Pakistani had come to the United States and announced that he would spend most of his trip in Salt Lake City and Tulsa, to see the Tabernacle and Oral Roberts University. Except that in Iran, the religious leaders still hold unquestioned authority. And in Qom, the original Islamic Revolution—the one that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979—remains robust and popular.

The day that I visited the Masumeh shrine, about a dozen people were standing in front of it, looking up at a blue backlit sign, about the size of a truly boss home-theater screen, displaying 14 lines of tightly printed Arabic. Pilgrims usually say the lines before entering, even if, like most Iranians, they speak very little Arabic. I fumbled the words—a long and repetitive series of blessings upon Muhammad, his prophetic predecessors, and his descendants—but the rest of the crowd intoned each syllable just right, with the precision of diamond cutters. Because Qom is a pilgrimage site, it attracts visitors from many parts of the Shiite world. In the right, or maybe wrong, light I can look vaguely Afghan, so the assumption of many fellow pilgrims was that I had come from central Afghanistan to visit Masumeh.

Inside, the shrine is immaculate. The body of Masumeh lies in a cubic metal cage near the complex's center. Shia converge on it from all sides to pay homage to someone considerably more important, in their view, than Mir-Hossein Moussavi, who is just the latest in a string of worldly fads. Once the pilgrims have ritually cleansed and incanted, they circle the cage counterclockwise, reaching over each other to feel its metal lattice and lunging forward

to let their lips linger on the Arabic lettering at its corners. This holy mosh pit sucked me toward Masumeh soon after I entered and, after I grazed the cube's corner with my hand, spewed me out into a tranquil open prayer area.

A short walk east from the shrine's entrance, on a large smooth-paved square, is Feyzieh, Iran's incubator for the powerful, its Sciences Po and its Kennedy School as well as its Vatican. I sat by the square's fountain and watched robed mullahs come and go. In any other place, their bearing and dress would make them grave and forbidding figures, but so many mullahs were walking through the square, doing so many mundane activities (text-messaging, scolding their children, eating candy), that they seemed no more regal than anyone else.

But Qom is their city, and a visitor eventually notices that here Iran's religious authorities are at their most confident, and its people at their most observant. The Revolutionary Guards, the uniformed element that executes the will of the mullahs, are uncharacteristically blunt about their suspicion of non-Muslim foreign visitors. Outside Qom they rarely harassed me, and at the former U.S. Embassy in Tehran they even invited me for tea and a tour. Here they relished their power and wielded it cruelly, issuing commands and interrogating me on street corners.

I spent a few hours at Feyzieh sneaking photos of clerics, talking with students, and visiting the tiny room where Khomeini had studied and taught for decades. As I was leaving, a soldier noticed my camera (a hot-pink Polaroid i733, perhaps not the best tool of spy-craft) and demanded to see the photos I had taken. My camera had on it images not only of the mullahs but of protests in Tehran. While I feigned confusion and smiled dumbly, I slipped out the memory card and eventually handed the soldier a camera with no photos of Feyzieh or protests at all, just a small cache of innocent pictures on its local memory drive—a few of monuments and street scenes in Tehran, and one of me playing air guitar in my hotel room. Only the soldier's embarrassment at seeing the air-guitar photo, and the intervention of a student I had befriended, persuaded him to release me. Hours later, at the

small house where Khomeini once lived, another Revolutionary Guard demanded money in memory of the ayatollah. I gave him 100 tomans, enough for a cup of tea. He said “*Sabz, sabz*,” or “Green, green”—meaning that the ayatollah's memory was honored only by U.S. dollars, cash.

Despite their conservatism, Qom's pilgrims seemed motivated not by passion for Ahmadinejad—I never heard anyone say his name, though the “Leader” Ali Khamenei was mentioned repeatedly over outdoor loudspeakers—but by a total denial of politics, and a preference for something much simpler. In Tehran the previous week, I'd heard many rumors about protests, violence, provocation. Here I saw no sign of disloyalty to the government (save one: on a campaign bumper sticker with a picture of Ahmadinejad next to the slogan MAN OF THE PEOPLE, someone had scraped out his eyes and cheeks). Instead, I felt the opposite of the idealistic flurries of this summer's protests—the happy docility of a one-party state. ■

Graeme Wood is a correspondent for theatlantic.com.

THE MILITARY

SimCity Baghdad

A NEW COMPUTER GAME

LETS ARMY OFFICERS

PRACTICE COUNTERINSURGENCY
OFF THE BATTLEFIELD.

By Brian Mockenhaupt

LIEUTENANT COLONELS Matthew Moore and Kevin Mindak repaired the airport, the bus terminal, and the water-treatment plant. They silenced three insurgent groups and won the support of many in Al-Hamra'. But the mayor, Anwar Sadiq, still spoke out against the U.S. Army battalion stationed in his town.

Sadiq was causing similar headaches for Lieutenant Colonels Brian Payne and Isaac Peltier.

“We may have to remove him from office,” Peltier said.

“Why is he not on board?” Payne wondered. “We fixed something for him. We went to visit him. And still, governance is going down.”

“We’ve done a lot for the Sunni people, too,” Peltier said. “He’s just corrupt.”

As Payne and Peltier debated what to do about the mayor, a female suicide bomber killed 20 police recruits, and the people's anger shifted from the insurgents to the U.S. troops.

The Americans had met men like Sadiq before, albeit under different circumstances. Peltier had been to Iraq three times; Payne spent 26 of the past 40 months there. And they would likely be going back to Iraq or to Afghanistan. As part of their training, Peltier, Payne, Moore, Mindak, and five other lieutenant colonels in the Army's School for Command Preparation, at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, were wrestling with Sadiq in a new computer game called UrbanSim. Rolled out last May, UrbanSim allows U.S. officers to practice counterinsurgency without suffering real-world consequences.

As the men hunched over their computers trying to decide how to handle Sadiq and a range of other problems, Matthew Bosack, his crisp blue shirt a sharp contrast to the officers' combat fatigues, peered over their shoulders with a slight smile. "The cocktail-party explanation: I say I make SimCity Baghdad," said Bosack, a project manager at the University of Southern California's Institute for Creative Technologies, which developed the game. "You're basically the mayor. But instead of tornadoes, earthquakes, and Godzilla running around your city, it's insurgents."

In recent years, the military has ramped up training at places like the National Training Center, in California, and the Joint Readiness Training Center, in Louisiana, where Arabic speakers play the parts of mayors, police chiefs, and townspeople. Although effective, these exercises are hugely expensive and logistically complex; any one officer might have just a few interactions with his "counterparts." But computer games are cheap and can be played anywhere. And because the students all run the same scenarios, they can compare the efficacy of different approaches.

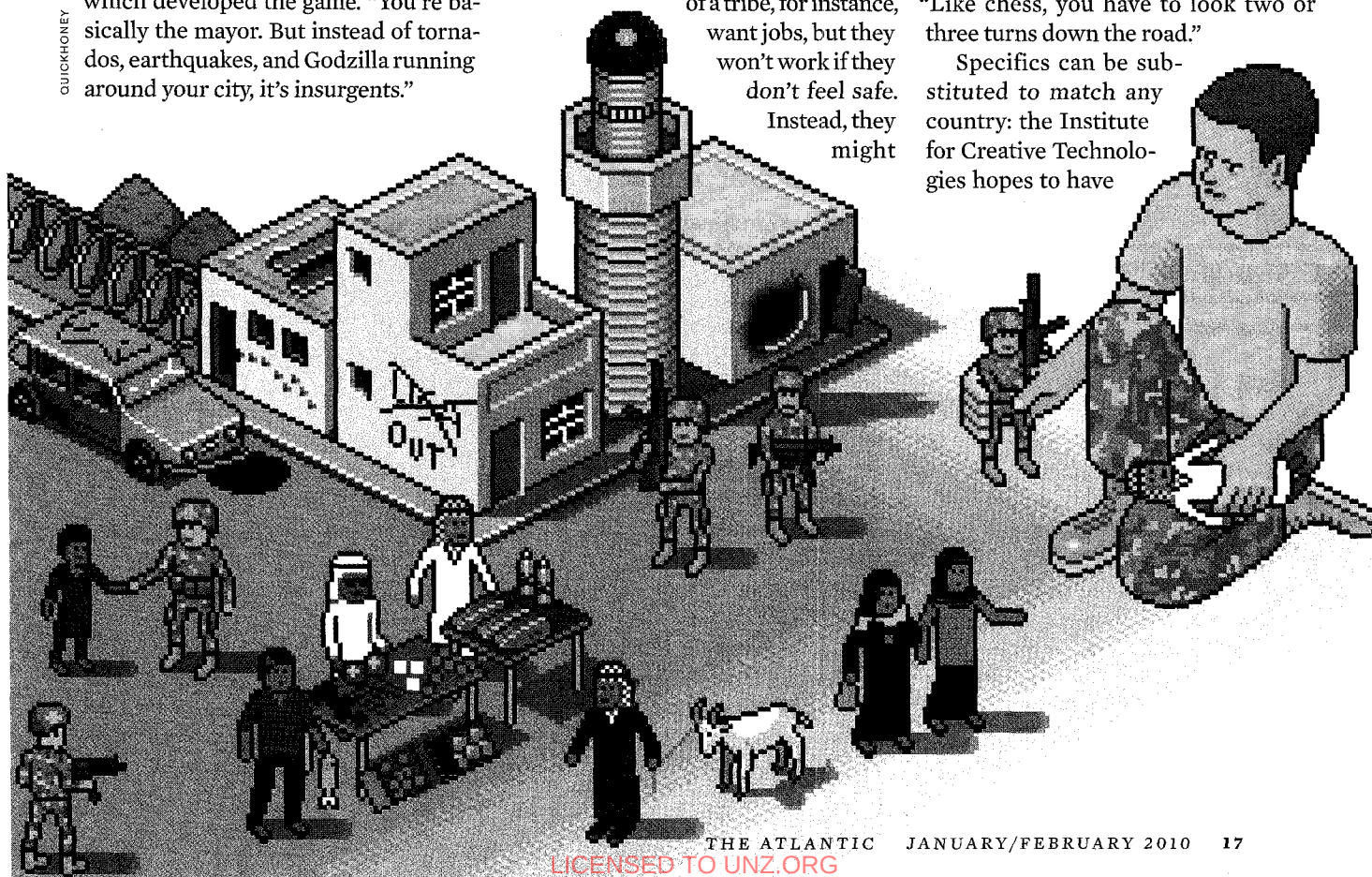
Over dinner several years ago, an Army officer lamented to Randall Hill, the executive director of the Institute for Creative Technologies, that he and his men had been unprepared for what they faced after Baghdad's fall. "We need SimCity," he told Hill. The institute, which receives much of its funding from the Army, modeled UrbanSim on those experiences—the blood and tears of officers who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bosack and his team then built the game's characters as autonomous agents that react not just to specific actions, but to the climate created by a player's overall strategy. Members

of a tribe, for instance, want jobs, but they won't work if they don't feel safe. Instead, they might

join the insurgents. Patrolling neighborhoods, meeting with tribal elders, and creating more economic opportunities—tactics straight from counterinsurgency manuals—can reduce the likelihood of that outcome in the game.

Critics say such simulations can give a false sense of mastery over impossible-to-predict real-life situations. Indeed, some players have assumed the simulation is a crystal ball. Students have asked Bosack if the game can be loaded with real data for areas to which they'll be deploying so they can use it as a tool for planning operations. Bosack, who studied sociology at UCLA after a Basic Cadet Training injury at the Air Force Academy, is quick to quash such notions. "This isn't a predictive tool," he says. "We're not trying to say that if you go meet with the mayor eight times, then you're going to have the support of the city and there will be less IED attacks." Rather, the intent is to teach commanders new ways of thinking about multiple problems in a fast-changing environment, always reevaluating instead of fixating on one approach. "You have to think through the cause and effect of your decisions," said Colonel Todd Ebel, the director of the School for Command Preparation. "Like chess, you have to look two or three turns down the road."

Specifics can be substituted to match any country: the Institute for Creative Technologies hopes to have



QUICKHONEY

DISPATCHES

a full Afghanistan-based simulation built in the next few months, with new variables for culture, tribal relations, and geography.

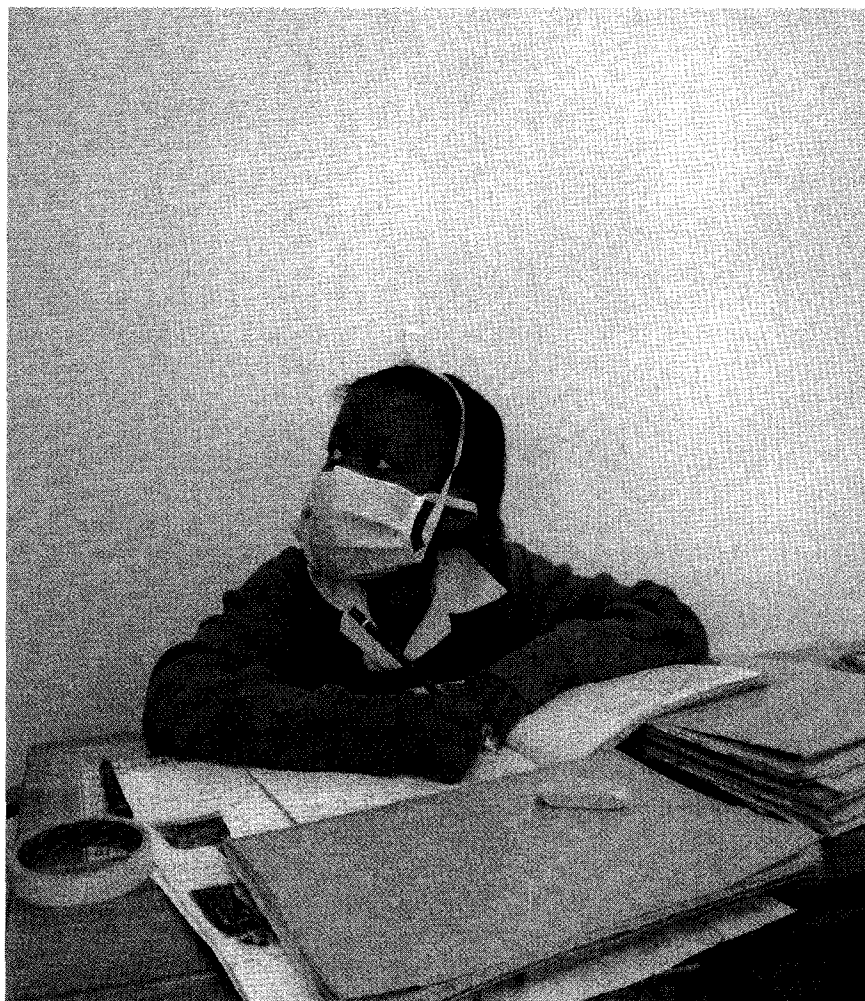
Students, partnered in teams of two, spend about three hours playing through 15 turns, each of which represents several days in the fictitious Al-Hamra'. Bar graphs show how the players' actions affect governance, economics, security, essential services, and the capabilities of local police and soldiers. Overall success is measured by residents' support for the coalition and the local government. The game starts with 25 percent supporting coalition forces, 35 percent neutral, and 40 percent against.

The worst student so far ended up with 70 percent of the town against him. "He thought the only way to increase civil security was to go bust down people's doors," Bosack said. Of course, there's a balance here; the insurgents must be dealt with. "You can't just let them run around," Bosack said. "We've had students focus on essential services and ignore civil security, and they stay stagnant. They inch forward, but insurgents knock it all back."

Most of the students playing on the September morning I visited had already walked that line in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they recalled hard-earned lessons as they pacified Al-Hamra'. "Just because you can shoot, doesn't mean you should," said Moore, whose Stryker Battalion helped clear the al-Qaeda stronghold of Baquba during the 2007 Iraq troop surge. "We relentlessly pursued the enemy, mostly at night, just crushing guys," he said. "But during the day we were kissing babies and shaking hands. It's a balance. You can't just do one."

That approach worked well for Moore and Mindak in UrbanSim. They recruited more police officers, arrested a sniper, and rebuilt the market. They worked around the mayor without alienating him, and finished with 76 percent of residents supporting them, 13 percent against, and 11 percent neutral, results that any commander today would yearn for—and will probably never see. ■

Brian Mockenhaupt is a fellow at the Alicia Patterson Foundation and a former infantryman.



Homework time at Sizwe Hospital School, in Johannesburg

MEDICINE

Side Effect

IN SOUTH AFRICA, GOOD INTENTIONS AND POOR FOLLOW-THROUGH ARE HELPING TO SPREAD DEADLY DRUG-RESISTANT TUBERCULOSIS.

By Elizabeth Chiles Shelburne

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD KABELA sits under a eucalyptus tree outside the Sizwe Hospital School in Johannesburg, South Africa, and tells me about his life. "We write nicely, and we do the work, and we come play, and we play the jungle gym, and we go for break and we come back ... We take the homework books. We come again tomorrow."

When Kabela was born, his mother passed along her HIV infection, which would have been a death sentence a few years earlier. Instead, Kabela has the plump, fresh face of a patient on

antiretrovirals. But before his mother died, she also passed along the extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB) infection that killed her. Kabela's TB, like his mother's, almost certainly is a death sentence. Last year, doctors at Sizwe Hospital, where Kabela is quarantined, discovered a hole in his lung the size of a tennis ball. Though he brims with energy and charm and dances to even the mere suggestion of music, he has little chance of leaving this hospital alive.

In 2006, a study from the small town of Tugela Ferry, South Africa, shocked the world with news of an outbreak of extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis that had killed more than 98 percent of the patients that it infected, many of whom had AIDS. Doctors detected XDR-TB after noticing that AIDS patients, who are particularly vulnerable to tuberculosis, were dying even after being treated for TB and starting antiretrovirals.

ELIZABETH CHILES SHELburne

Each year, the number of tuberculosis cases increases in South Africa—in fact, as the disease nearly tripled in prevalence in the past decade, it became one of the top killers of South Africans. But the resurgence of tuberculosis is not limited to South Africa. India and China have the largest numbers of tuberculosis cases, and multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) has been found in nearly every country, with XDR-TB in at least 57 countries. A major hurdle in treating MDR-TB and XDR-TB is that the course lasts up to two years and is 200 to 1,000 times more expensive than regular TB drugs. Even with treatment, multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis kills 30 percent of those infected, while XDR-TB kills roughly 60 percent. Unless the world gets ahead of the epidemic, drug-resistant forms of tuberculosis may not only kill hundreds of thousands, but also render moot global efforts to roll out HIV/AIDS antiretrovirals.

In the 1990s, as new drug-resistant strains of TB reawakened concern about an ancient foe, global health authorities launched a treatment plan called DOTS. The program calls for “directly observed therapy,” meaning that a patient must be observed taking medication each day by a health worker for the six-month course. Treatment is provided under a government commitment that includes not just a steady drug supply, but diagnostics and monitoring as well. Designed to ensure that people complete their treatment regimen, the program—when it is properly implemented—works very well at both curing patients and preventing the rise of drug resistance. But the DOTS program also highlights a deadly paradox: in places like South Africa, where patients often stop showing up for (or “default from”) treatment, and follow-up is spotty due to lack of resources, the result of greater access to drugs can be rising rates of drug resistance.

“It’s been realized that under perfect conditions, DOTS works, but not really in real-life circumstances,” says Martie van der Walt, acting director of the tuberculosis-epidemiology group of South Africa’s Medical Research Council. In South Africa, 8.5 percent of all TB patients default from treatment, and

the overall cure rate is a dismal 65 percent, well below the World Health Organization’s target of 85 percent. If these default or uncured patients become resistant to first-line drugs, they can spread their strain of the disease to their communities, a phenomenon that is fueling South Africa’s epidemic.

The first new TB drugs in 40 years are in the pipeline, but they will not be available for at least two years, and they won’t necessarily solve the current problems. Indeed, according to Mario Raviglione, director of the WHO’s Stop TB Department, unless these new drugs are protected from misuse in ways that the old ones were not, “we lose them.”

For now, Kabela shuttles between school and Sizwe Hospital’s Ward Six. “He’s taking his medicine faithfully because he knows it means going home,” says Priya Singh, the school headmistress. No one has had the heart to tell him that he will likely die in the same hospital that he has been in for four years, in part because the world adopted a good system that many countries lacked the wherewithal to implement. ■

Elizabeth Chiles Shelburne, a writer based in Boston, received a fellowship from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation to fund this reporting.

BUGS

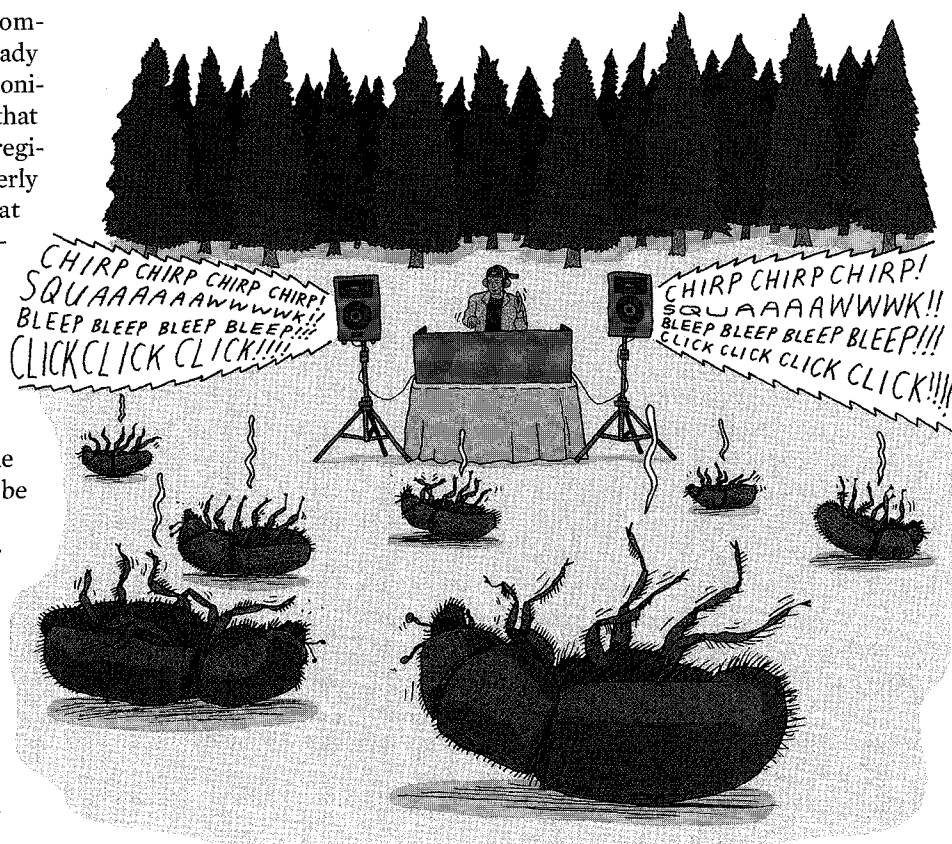
Beetle Mania

A SCIENTIST, A POOL HUSTLER, AND AN AVANT-GARDE COMPOSER FIGHT A FEARSOME INSECT INVASION.

By Jim Giles

ONE STICKY AFTERNOON last summer, I picked my way through yellow-green grass on the slopes of Humphreys Peak, close to Flagstaff, with Richard Hofstetter, a beetle expert at Northern Arizona University. Looking up the mountain, we could see the skeletal frames of dead trees amid evergreen forest. We entered a stand. The ground was a mess of lifeless branches. Douglas, corkbark, spruce—about half the conifers were dead or dying.

Hofstetter cut a neat rectangle into the spongy surface of a fallen tree and peeled back the bark. Spruce ips, a species of bark beetle, had carved a delta of channels into the underside to feed off the tree’s sap. When enough beetles take up residence, the host tree is overwhelmed and dies. Due to recent droughts, which weaken the trees, and mild winters, which bark beetles prefer, western forests covering an area



PETER ARKLE

the size of Maine are under invasion. In the worst-hit regions, like Colorado and British Columbia, entire forests could be reduced to grassland—victims of the largest insect infestations ever to strike North America.

Hofstetter and his colleagues believe they may have found a way to halt this plague: by driving the insects crazy. For years, entomologists have studied the chemicals that the beetles release for mating and communicating, hoping that they could be manipulated as a deterrent or used for control. This approach has had limited success. But in early 2005, Hofstetter met Reagan McGuire, a former truck driver and pool hustler who had quit his job and enrolled at NAU. McGuire had been thinking a lot about the bark-beetle epidemic, and he came up with a novel idea: perhaps a military crowd-control device he had read about, which emits powerful pulses of sound, could be used to kill the insects. Most scientists would have politely ushered him away, and Hofstetter admits he was hesitant. (“He looked at me like I was crazy” is how McGuire remembers it.) But McGuire convinced the entomologist that the idea might have merit, and the two started to collaborate, with McGuire working as a research assistant.

The military technology, it turned out, didn’t have much practical application. But a little Googling on the subject of beetles and acoustics led the two to David Dunn, an avant-garde composer and collector of animal sounds. Dunn had inserted microphones into the pinyon pines that surround his home in Santa Fe and recorded a CD of the noises they captured. Amid the gurgling of pine sap and slow flexing of the trees can be heard a stream of chirps: the calls of pinyon engraver beetles. The recording marked a turning point for Hofstetter. He and his colleagues had been so focused on finding a chemical deterrent that they hadn’t given much thought to exploiting the beetles’ acoustic abilities. Yet Dunn had captured what sounded like a complex communication system. Somewhere in that entomological language, Hofstetter realized, there might be signals that could be used to disrupt the beetles’ behavior.

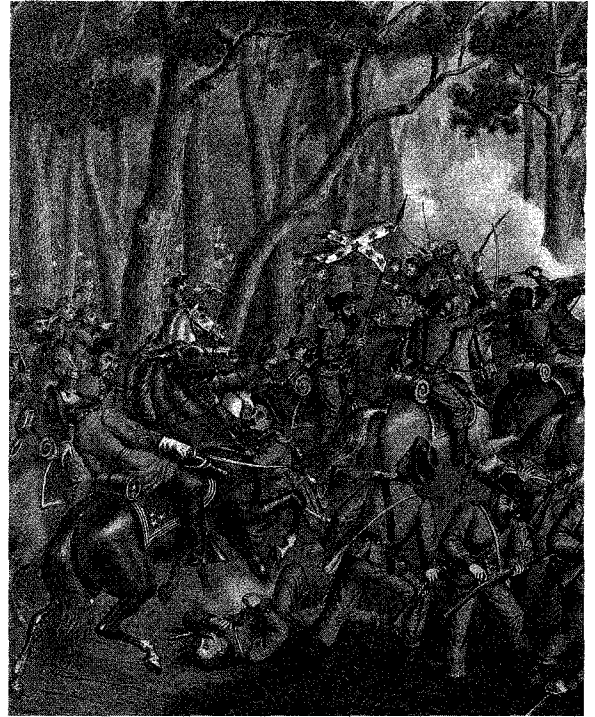
McGuire began his search for a sonic weapon by bombarding the bugs with

Guns N’ Roses songs and Rush Limbaugh shows in his laboratory. He later got better results using the aggression calls made by the male insects (recorded with Dunn’s help) together with artificial squawks and bleeps of the same frequency. When I visited Hofstetter at NAU, the result was booming through speakers around his lab. The effect it has on the beetles is extraordinary. Hofstetter told me that he had witnessed a pair mate and then, after the sound was switched on, watched as the male ate the female. Nothing like it had been seen before. “People from all over the building were coming in to look,” he said.

In one experiment, the team had placed a beetle on a thin slice of pine sandwiched between two clear panes of Plexiglas. Days before I arrived, the sound had prompted the distraught insect to try to escape by tunneling through the Plexiglas. I asked McGuire if he still had that experiment set up. He paused as he handed it over, looking down at the pane: “Wow. He got out.” In the middle of the Plexiglas was a tiny hole, and no sign of the beetle. McGuire grinned. “We drove him crazy.”

The team plans to try out a version of this technology in the spring. Dunn showed me a car-stereo speaker he’s been testing, which can produce the high-frequency sounds that beetles hear. He described how he had screwed the speaker into a pinyon pine and listened as the output reverberated up and down the trunk. The team believes the device can be used to pump McGuire’s sonic deterrent into vulnerable trees. Fitting every tree in a forest with a speaker would of course be impossible. But if the sounds prove disturbing enough to drive beetles out of the trees, or to deter new arrivals from burrowing into the bark, a ribbon of trees equipped with these cheap devices could form a kind of acoustic firebreak. Enough, perhaps, to protect some of the many millions of acres of still-healthy forests from the advancing beetle armies. ■

Jim Giles is a writer based in San Francisco.



HISTORY

Battle of the Big Box

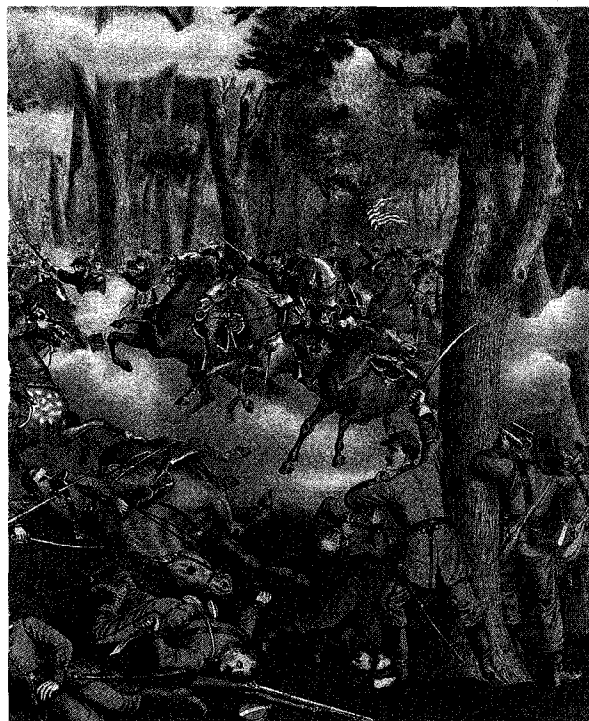
SAVING HALLOWED GROUND
FROM WALMART
By Ta-Nehisi Coates

LAST AUGUST, I WENT slightly mad while driving through central Virginia. The roads around Richmond are sprinkled with markers delineating the region’s singular place in American history—and particularly Civil War history, my latest obsession. It took all I had not to swerve off the road every time a sign celebrating Gabriel Prosser or Stonewall Jackson’s arm came into view. To the chagrin of my family members who were in tow, my efforts at self-control rarely succeeded.

Our first day in Virginia was providence itself. Half-lost, we were wending our way through back roads when we happened upon New Market Heights. A century and a half ago, regiments of the USCT—United States Colored Troops—had engaged a Confederate force there, and won 14 Medals of Freedom.

I pulled our rental car to the side of the road, and treated my son and nephew to an awkward impromptu lecture on the bravery of Sergeant Major Christian Fleetwood and Private Charles

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Fighting on Orange Plank Road during the Battle of the Wilderness, May 6, 1864

Veale. It was only mildly successful—I had to talk over SUVs loudly whizzing past, and there really wasn't much to see. Parts of the battlefield had been destroyed by housing developments. Other portions, owned by the county, are closed to the public. I ordered the kids out of the car and had them read the marker aloud, in unison. They squirmed around and gave mediocre waves as I snapped pictures.

In my lifetime, I have floated through all manner of geekdom—comic books, sci-fi, sports, medieval history, video games. The Civil War, with its swash-buckling heroes, its staggering toll, and its consequence of emancipation, is the culmination of an unorthodox intellectual journey. Galactus and Charlemagne are charming, but if not for Fleetwood and Veale, I might not exist. By the time I stumbled upon New Market Heights, I'd read about the battle in at least three books. But I had come to Virginia to move beyond books and render my journey through the "late unpleasantness" in 3-D. Books about everything from the caliber of every cannon fired to post-traumatic stress disorder to Civil War cuisine can't adequately capture the actual conditions under which the soldiers lived and died; they can't convey, say, the spatial reality of being caught between gunfire from two sides. Any lesson on the Battle of the Crater

isn't complete until you've been to Petersburg and seen the crater for yourself. Civil War sites are the classrooms of history.

Unfortunately, at New Market Heights, the classroom was closed. The Civil War Preservation Trust annually presents a list of 25 battlefields that are "endangered" and "at risk" because of sprawl and development. (Last year's included New Market Heights.) But the battlefield where the war between preservation and commerce now rages most ferociously is the Wilderness, in Orange County, Virginia, where in May of 1864, the two armies took 28,000 casualties, some of them wounded men who were incinerated in a forest fire.

Soon, the Wilderness may also be known for everyday low prices, thanks to Walmart's plans to put a new store at the site's very doorstep. The fight has pitted locals in search of decent value ("Go find a shirt in Orange," someone told the local paper. "You can't") against preservationists from Virginia and elsewhere, including the historian James McPherson and the actor Robert Duvall, a descendant of Confederate patriot Robert E. Lee.

The intersection of Routes 20 and 3, where Walmart hopes to build, holds special significance. "It's at that exact place where 100,000 Union soldiers go south," says Rob Nieweg of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "They were ordered to turn right and continue on to Spotsylvania Courthouse and the Bloody Angle, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg, and ultimately, Appomattox and the end of the Civil War. It's the best place in America to stand and understand the average Union soldier's experience, at that moment, knowing that what he fought for wasn't wasted."

In September, the National Trust joined a coalition of preservationists filing suit to prevent Walmart from going forward. Walmart contends that the

battlefield entrance is actually a mile away, and notes that it's been in discussions about the store with the community for more than a year. "This whole process has been going on for nearly 18 months," Keith Morris, a spokesperson for Walmart, told me. "It has been a meticulous process that's been thoroughly vetted and evaluated through public hearings, and we were approved almost unanimously by the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors."

Even if the preservationists prevail, the future of the Wilderness will still be in doubt. The land is zoned for commercial development. The current fight recalls the battle, 15 years ago, when preservationists stopped Disney from building a theme park near the Manassas battlefield, in Northern Virginia, only to see the area overtaken by residential sprawl.

On our last day in Virginia, I drove my family out to the Wilderness. By then we'd seen the Petersburg battlefield, where the war drew to its bloody close, and Shirley Plantation, a sprawling estate along the James River, once tended by slaves. But the sheer emptiness of the Wilderness's grassland and forest made it more haunting. A ranger sitting under a canopy directed us to various portions of the park, because we'd just missed the tour. We walked up a dirt road into the woods, and saw earthworks and trenches that had been preserved for close to 150 years. Across from there, the ranger

told us, you could see an open field that Union soldiers had charged across, only to be cut down by Confederates concealed in the woods and protected by fortifications. For a fleeting moment, I could actually imagine the smell

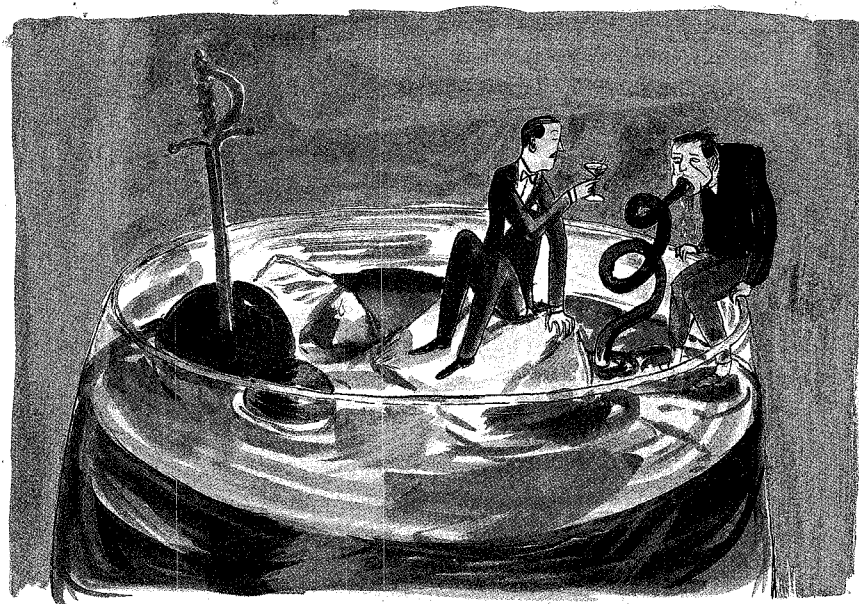
of gunpowder and sweat in the August heat, and the sense that death awaited.

Afterward, we drove out Orange Plank Road, east of Grant's path as he marched toward Richmond; we turned onto Route 3, and after a few miles saw an assortment of big-box stores blooming out of the horizon. We grumbled some about the spoilage of development—and then stopped at Cracker Barrel for breakfast. ■

Ta-Nehisi Coates is an Atlantic contributing editor. He blogs at ta-nehisicoates.theatlantic.com

MORE ONLINE

For a video tour of the Wilderness battlefield with Ta-Nehisi Coates, see theatlantic.com/battlefield.
THEATLANTIC.COM



DRINK

Divine Proportions

THE DRINKING MAN'S CASE FOR SMALLER COCKTAILS

By Wayne Curtis

THE ADIOS MO-FO is among the most popular drinks sold at Howl at the Moon, at Universal CityWalk in Los Angeles. A friend and I ordered one on a recent visit, then watched the bartender deftly hoist and upend four bottles at once—rum, gin, vodka, and blue Curaçao—letting loose long strands of colorful liquid, as if from the udder of a magical cow. Sitting and sipping, I found the drink to be memorable in any number of ways. For one, it was very blue—more blue than any swimming pool I've seen, and roughly as enjoyable to drink. But mostly, I was taken by its swimming pool-like proportions: 86 ounces, served in what appeared to be a plastic paint bucket sprouting two-foot-long red straws.

This is the hugest drink I've come across—by my calculation, it's a double-duodecuple—but it's not an isolated example. Many chain bars have embraced the cartoonishly large cocktail, from the 18-ounce Ultimate Mango Berry Daiquiri at T.G.I. Friday's to the 24-ounce Big Rita found at Margaritaville. Even in non-cartoon bars, 10-ounce Martini glasses and 12-ounce rocks glasses are not uncommon these days, and drinkers will give

bartenders an aggrieved "Dude, where's the rest of it?" look if a large glass is not filled to the brim. The famous Big Ass Beer sold on Bourbon Street in New Orleans has even been eclipsed: last year I saw a Biggest Ass Beer in Memphis.

Of course, Americans have tippled big drinks as long as they've been tipping. Colonial taverns once set out large bowls filled with potent punches and vast tankards of flip, a hot toddy concocted with rum, beer, and molasses. But big drinks fell out of favor around the end of the 19th century, as the golden age of the refined cocktail dawned. Robert Hess, the author of *The*

Essential Bartender's Guide, told me that pre-Prohibition bar guides generally recommended glasses much smaller than those seen today—one 1917 manual suggested cocktail glassware ranging from just two and a half to

four ounces. And the *Mad Men* swilling their way through the notorious three-Martini lunches of yore? Pantywaists. Those three Martinis combined would barely fill half a Big Rita glass.

Small cocktails were favored for a simple reason: they stay chilled from beginning to end. Few things are as unappealing as a Martini that's warm when you hit bottom, with the possible

exception of an Old-Fashioned on the rocks that's both watery *and* warm at bottom. (I cannot attest to the last sip of the Adios Mo-Fo; disturbingly, it gave me a hangover without my ever getting tipsy, and I conceded defeat after an inch or two.) Cocktails should be like tapas: intense hits of complex, well-balanced flavors in small portions that leave one wanting more.

Happily, some of the country's better bars—like the venerable Pegu Club in New York, and Craigie on Main in Cambridge—are inciting a small-cocktail revival. If I had to nominate one icon to represent this trend, it would be the newly popular coupe glass. This is a small, stemmed glass with a gently rounded bowl that makes it more stable and more comfortable in the hand than a stiffly angled Martini glass. Coupes generally hold only four or five ounces, and they inspire many pleasing myths, the most persistent being that the original was made from a mold of Marie Antoinette's breast. They were once used to serve champagne, but fell out of favor when flutes proved superior. Today you'll find classic drinks like the Hanky Panky and the Boulevardier served in them, allowing toppers to get a snootful of aromatics as they sip.

Recently, I stopped by the Franklin Mortgage and Investment Company, a speakeasy-style basement bar in Philadelphia. I ordered a Diamondback, a beguiling mix of rye, chartreuse, and applejack served in a four-and-a-half-ounce version of a classic Nick and Nora glass. It was cold at the beginning, cold at the end, and delightful all the way through. Alex Day, the beverage manager, has been looking through antique bar guides. He told me he's intrigued by recipes for even smaller drinks, such as the original Corpse Reviver, consisting of brandy, apple brandy, and dry vermouth—"something very small, with a big burst of flavor, like a little pick-me-up," he said. Such drinks were originally created as bracers with which to greet the dawn, and Day hopes to add others to his menu. He's not yet sure how to price them, or if customers will be as intrigued as he is. I'm not sure either. But a Corpse Reviver sounds like the perfect antidote to the Adios Mo-Fo. ▀

Wayne Curtis is an Atlantic contributing editor.

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The Passage Verdeau, built in 1845 near the site of the city's old ramparts, links to the Jouffroy and Panoramas arcades.

TRAVEL

Paris Under Glass

EXPLORING THE CITY'S HISTORIC, AND SEDUCTIVE, SHOPPING ARCADES
By Lynn Yaeger

THE RACK OUTSIDE La Boîte à Joujoux in the Passage Jouffroy offers personalized note cards with names fiercely Francophile: Thibault and Sandrine, Yannick and Séverine. In an increasingly homogenized Paris, where Ralph Lauren is camped across from La Madeleine and Tommy Hilfiger colonizes the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, the businesses in Paris's historic passages—or arcades—still exude an orienting sense of place.

The passages, a series of covered arcades built mainly between the 1820s and '40s (there were 150 by the mid-1800s; today there are 24 standing and 19 open for business), might first appear rather old-fashioned, low-key, sometimes even slightly grubby. But look more closely: these corridors, the most

interesting of which are located on the Right Bank in a disconnected web that can be traversed in a leisurely hour or two, offer a fascinating peek at Paris's mercantile past. Not just compelling as historical artifacts—the arcades are the world's first mini-malls—the passages are a still-vibrant testament to the endurance of the retail spirit, of the pure fun of shopping, as enticing now as it was 200 years ago. The arcades allow you to partake in the same activities as visitors on the Grand Tour did centuries ago—like them, you are meant to admire the chandeliers and the *boiserie*, stop for a snack, and even, despite these perilous economic times, maybe purchase a little something.

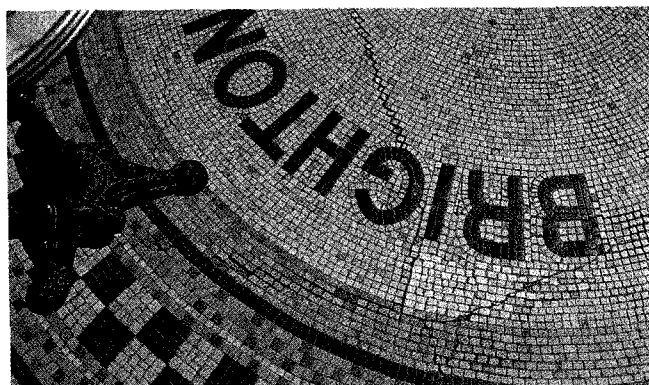
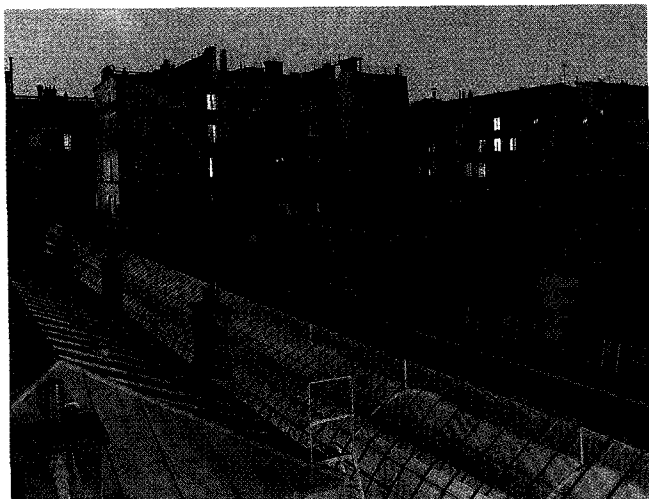
Much of what enraptured tourists in the past is still gloriously intact: the vaulted glass ceilings; the checkerboard

floors; the odd little shops with names like *Le Bonheur des Dames*, the unironic moniker of a needlepoint shop in the Passage Verdeau. (A rule of thumb for arcade charm: the more a passage has been restored, the more exquisite its pilasters and gleaming its glass ceiling, the less gripping its fragile appeal. For example, the Galerie Vivienne, despite a lovely mosaic floor and the presence of a vast Jean-Paul Gaultier boutique anchoring one entrance, more closely resembles a high-end shopping district in Dallas or Palm Beach than a neoclassical edifice.)

Go when it's raining. The arcades were hailed as revolutionary when they first opened; they allowed Parisians to go shopping, apparently always one of the town's favorite activities, without getting their feet wet. And Mesdames and Messieurs could truly see what was in those tantalizing vitrines—the arcades were early converts to gaslight.

You might start your tour at the Hôtel Chopin, nestled deep in Passage Jouffroy, where you could theoretically

ANDREW DUKE/ALAMY



The Paris arcades light up the cityscape and include shops, hotels, and mosaics like this one in the Rue de Rivoli.

begin your investigation by tumbling out of bed (from 76 euros). The surrealists loved this passage ("The father of Surrealism was Dada; its mother was an arcade," commented the social philosopher Walter Benjamin, who adored the arcades so much he wrote a thousand-plus-page book about them), perhaps because it also hosts the creepy Musée Grévin, a Victorian holdover still welcoming people fascinated with the greasy gleam of wax museums.

Directly across the Boulevard Montmartre is the Passage des Panoramas, so named for the impressive murals-in-the-round that were once this arcade's big draw. Those works are long gone, and now the place is seductively shabby, with much of the ghostly allure of the original architecture still unharmed.

Many of the shops in the arcades specialize in books, stationery, old postcards, and in the case of the Passage des Panoramas, stamps. In the Passage Jouffroy is the celebrated bookstore Cinédoc, with its Louise Brooks and Audrey Hepburn biographies, directly

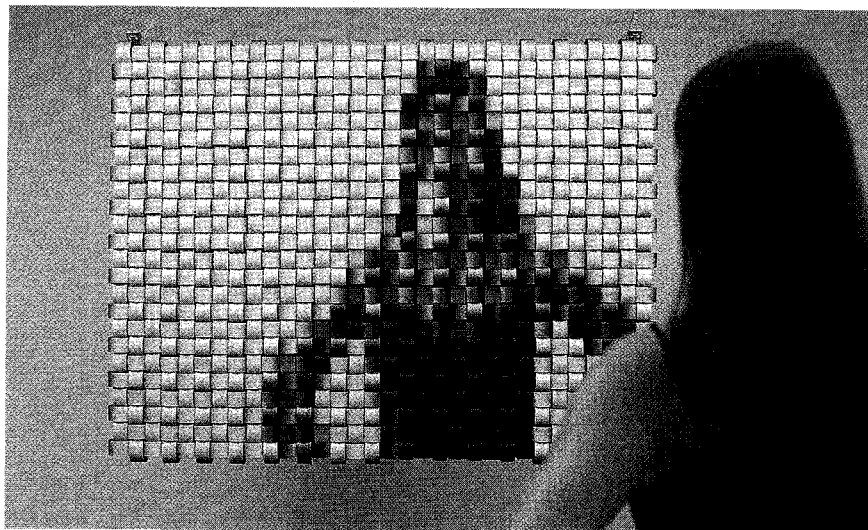
across from Paul Vulin, a *librairie* where the art monographs are displayed on wooden racks outside. Hang a right on the Galerie des Variétés to the Galerie Feydeau (the corridors have names, like streets) and you uncover shadowy, mysterious venues. One shop appears to consist of nothing but a table, a stack of black stamp albums, and a beautiful woman. Even establishments that went out of business years ago have a way of making their presence known—in front of a shop now selling jewelry in the Passage des Panoramas is a vast mosaic Art Deco mat spelling out WATERMAN JIF, from the days when the pen you used said something about you.

In the Passage Choiseul, a five-minute walk from the Panoramas, Lavrut, here since 1922, offers painters' smocks in two styles—the Corot and the Manet. The main character in Radclyffe Hall's Sapphic classic, *The Well of Loneliness*, visits Lavrut to purchase blotting paper and notebooks, though Hall herself was disinclined to the Passage Choiseul, describing it, in 1928, as "surely the most

hideous place in all Paris, with its roof of stark wooden ribs and glass panes—the roof that looks like the vertebral column of some prehistoric monster."

Not all the businesses in the arcades have such ancient provenances. For every Lavrut there is a place like 26 Passage, a literal jewel box in the Passage Verdeau that offers delicate charms on cords that on closer examination turn out to be marijuana-leaf bracelets. And in the stunning Passage Véro-Dodat, under a glass sign high on the wall touting PAPETERIE IMPRIMERIE, a shop window features a stuffed ibex sporting a fringed purse slung around her neck, and hot-pink stilettos. But this high-stepping mammal is not in search of *cartes des visites*—she's the talisman of the Christian Louboutin boutique, which is famous for cutting-edge scarlet-soled footwear and has taken up residence in this former stationery store, and she's just waiting for a surrealist or two to stroll in and pick up a pair of pumps. ■

Lynn Yaeger is a writer living in New York City.



Portrait of a young woman: Daniel Rozin's *Weave Mirror* in action

TECHNOLOGY

100,000 Leonardos

"PHYSICAL COMPUTERS" ARE DEMOCRATIZING ART AND INVENTION.

By William Gurstelle

PHYSICAL COMPUTERS AS populist devices may be the most momentous tech trend of the past five years that practically no one has heard about. Typically a small circuit board housed in a customized case, a physical computer is an easily programmable device that is aware of its surroundings. It is designed to interface with sensors that measure things around it—say, how fast an object is going, how close something is to it, the temperature around it. Based on that input, the computer takes action by moving switches and levers, displaying information, or otherwise controlling the environment.

For humans, connecting to computers via a mouse and keyboard has long been cheap and easy. For sensors, not so much. Now an inexpensive physical computer called the Arduino is changing all that. When the Arduino burst onto the do-it-yourself ("DIY" to devotees) scene in 2005, all manner of tinkerers seized on it as a device that could easily and cheaply run interactive projects.

Using an Arduino is fairly straightforward: buy a board (ranging from about \$19 to \$65) and attach it to a personal computer via a cable. Then load instructions into the Arduino's

processor via the personal computer. Once programmed, the Arduino makes decisions based on the information transmitted by whatever sensors you've hooked up, and does something corporeal, such as turn on or off the motors, displays, valves, and lights attached to it. For a few dollars, creative and motivated individuals—rather than just corporations or institutions—can make highly intelligent tools, perfectly customized for a particular need.

Most uses for physical computers are, at present, a bit curious. Robot-builders turn out autonomous, terrain-aware robots in their workshops. Tinkerers cruise sidewalks in Segway knockoffs. Sensualists use a tub of intelligent mud instead of a mouse to control their computer.

But especially in the art world, the Arduino is beginning to open new realms of creation and experience. Art galleries and museums, including New York's Museum of Modern Art and San Francisco's Exploratorium, have displayed interactive pieces that change shape and form based on what the people who gaze at them are doing. Consider the work of the New York artist Daniel Rozin, whose *Weave Mirror* (now on exhibit at London's Victoria and Albert Museum) forms images by individually

rotating 768 motorized planes. A physical computer inside senses the gallery environment, and a woven portrait of the viewer emerges as the planes rotate into place.

Such large artistic installations used to require multiple programmers and engineers. But now "artists and designers have the ability to do 100 percent of these projects by themselves and have total control over everything," Rozin says. "The expertise isn't that specialized anymore."

The number of devices—and the number of people who understand how to use them—grows daily (more than 100,000 are out there). Thousands of increasingly practical projects can be found on DIY, computer, and art Web sites. Security-conscious users can build intricate home-control systems. Photographers can connect lasers to physical computers to take ultra-high-speed photographs. Drivers can cruise more economically by tracking real-time engine performance and fuel-consumption data.

"In any community—art, plumbing, medicine—when users make adaptations of the tools, they make them just right, because they localize them for the community using them," says Tom Igoe, one of the primary developers of the Arduino and the head of physical-computing classes at the Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University. "It's like Leonardo da Vinci designing his own brushes and paints."

Sensors, as well as physical computers themselves, are still in their infancy. But what's coming off the Arduino drawing board suggests possibilities limited only by our imaginations: the Arduino Lilypad, for example, is a wearable (and washable) physical computer that allows input, output, and sensor devices to be sewn into clothing. Think handbags that know whether you have your keys, or jackets that know your preferred level of personal space and blow air on people who come too close (to name just two recent creations). Never has the phrase "the right tool for the job" been more ripe with opportunity. ■

William Gurstelle, a contributing editor for *Make* magazine, is the author of *Absinthe* and *Flamethrowers*.

JOHN BERENS/COURTESY BIFORMS GALLERY NYC AND ITP NYU

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New York's Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village: from biggest commercial real-estate deal to biggest bust?

Capitalist Fools

Commercial real estate is dominated by financial professionals, not hustlers looking for a quick flip. So why is the market about to melt down?

By Megan McArdle

FEW PLACES IN New York are less likely to inspire grand dreams than Stuyvesant Town and Peter Cooper Village, the twin housing projects that sprawl across 80 acres of the Lower East Side. Built by MetLife in the 1940s, the project encompasses block after block of boxy brick apartment buildings and stolid public spaces, entirely barren of inviting corners or eye-catching detail. The critic Lewis Mumford dubbed it “the architecture of the Police State”; a slightly kinder motto might have been “What do you expect for \$68.50 a month?”

Yet when MetLife spruced up the complex and put it on the market in 2006, real-estate moguls jetted in for

the sale. A joint venture put together by Tishman Speyer and BlackRock carried the day through its willingness to, as *The New York Times* noted, “pay up—way up—to unlock future profits in the sprawling Manhattan properties.” At \$5.4 billion, their winning bid made the sale the most expensive real-estate deal of all time.

Three years later, however, those profits were still securely locked inside the property’s 11,232 apartments—many of which remained rent-controlled, despite strenuous efforts to convert them to upscale market-rate rentals. With net income well under projections, the partnership started spending down its reserves. Then, in October 2009, a court ruled that the partnership had

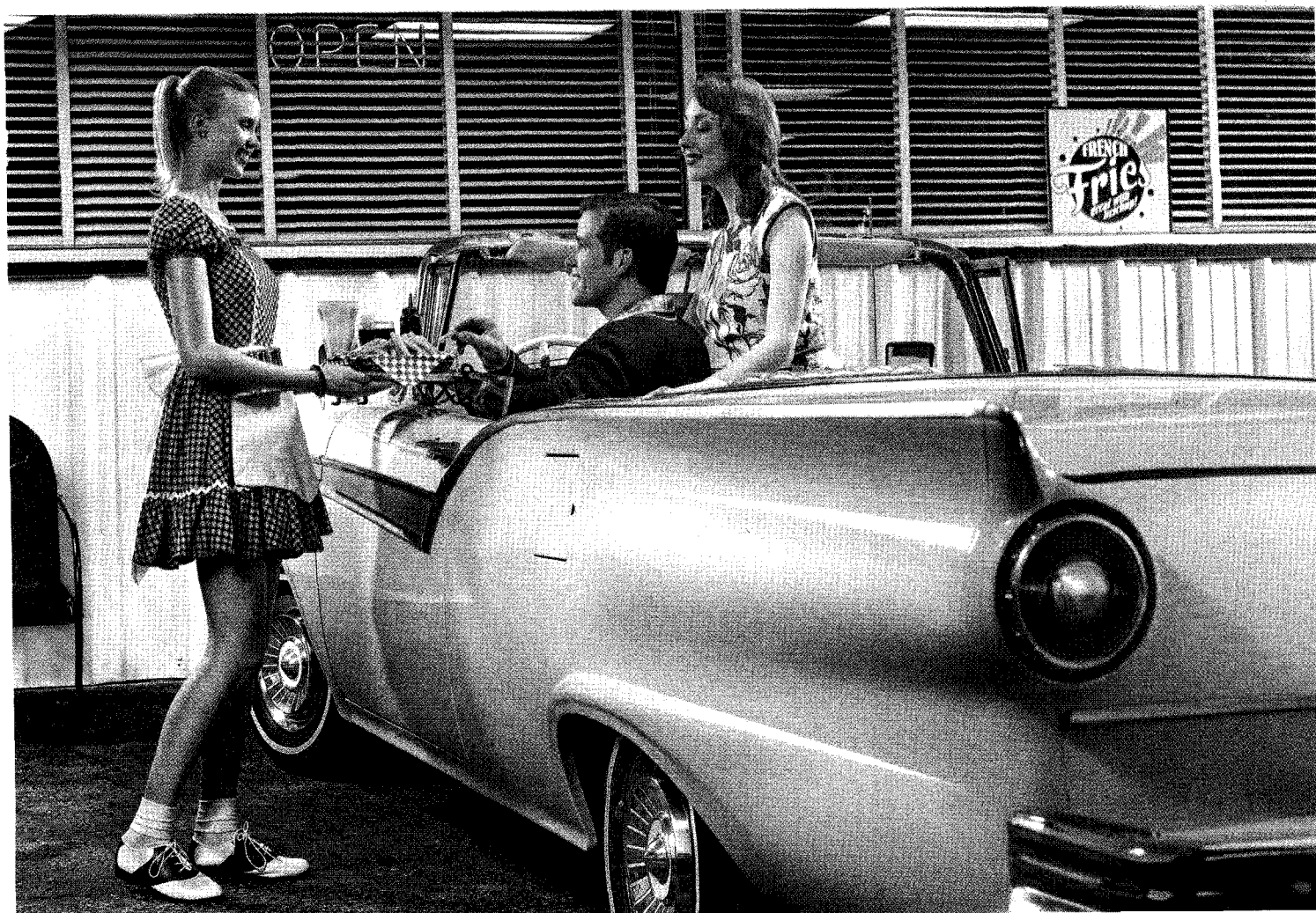
improperly decontrolled the rent for thousands of apartments, and would have to return them to their original status. As of this writing, analysts are predicting default in a matter of months unless the partnership’s debt of \$4.4 billion can be restructured—a shaky prospect, given that the owners may owe tenants of formerly rent-stabilized apartments as much as \$200 million in rent overcharges and damages. Stuyvesant Town might soon set another record: the biggest real-estate default in history.

That default would be one of the first tremors of an earthquake about to roil financial markets: a commercial real-estate crisis mirroring the catastrophe in the residential market. October

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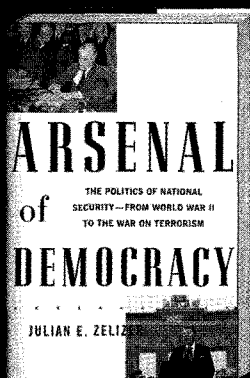
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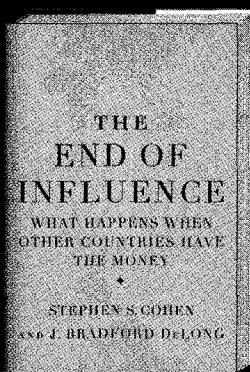
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brought both the Stuy Town deal's first death rattle and the bankruptcy of the real-estate financier Capmark. As annual bank failures topped 100 for the first time in almost two decades, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation Chair Sheila Bair fretted over the threat posed to lenders by losses linked to hotels, malls, and condominiums. But even as this new impending crisis unsettles commercial lenders and borrowers, the story of its origins can shed new light on how we got into this larger financial mess in the first place.

Commercial mortgage lenders basically have to worry about two kinds of default risk: cash-flow risk, and asset-price risk. Cash-flow risk is what happens to homeowners when the primary breadwinner becomes unemployed, and to landlords or hotel owners when rental prices plummet. Since commercial tenants typically sign relatively long leases, this problem tends to grow slowly except in hotels—and, apparently, in rent-controlled properties with litigious tenants.

But the risk posed by falling asset prices is a big problem for commercial landlords, and for their bankers. The value of much commercial real estate is tightly linked to employment—if employers don't have bodies to put at desks, they don't need more rooms to put the desks in. With unemployment north of 10 percent, and retail suffering, the nation's stock of commercial real estate is suddenly less valuable than it used to be.

In some ways, price declines are a bigger problem for landlords than for homeowners. Unless forced to move, homeowners with long-term mortgages who make enough to cover their payments can sit tight and hope the market recovers. Landlords, however, typically take out commercial loans for shorter terms of three to 10 years. In normal times, landlords coming to the end of a mortgage simply roll the debt over into a new loan. But collapsing asset values have wreaked havoc on this process.

Rising rents explain only 50 percent of the jump in commercial real-estate prices from 2003 to 2008; the rest was inflated optimism.

Now, as loans come up for renewal, lenders have to reassess how much credit they're willing to extend. Take a property that was worth \$100 million in 2007, when it was financed with a four-year, \$70 million mortgage. That's a reasonably conservative 70 percent loan-to-value (LTV) ratio. But if the building is worth only \$70 million when it's time to roll the loan over, keeping the LTV at 70 percent means that the owners can now borrow only \$49 million, and have

to come up with tens of millions to pay off the original loan. Worse, as the markets tighten, lenders tend to want to see a lower LTV in the deals they finance.

That suggests that a lot of commercial loans are going to go bad. According to Joseph Gyourko, a Wharton real-estate professor, at least \$250 billion worth of commercial loans are going to roll over in each of the next few

years. When they do, many landlords will probably be caught short—and so will their bankers. Although most U.S. residential mortgages were bundled into mortgage-backed securities, only a fraction of commercial mortgages were securitized. Some bank or finance company still carries the rest on its books and will have to write them down if they can't be rolled over; some of those banks will ultimately have to be taken over by the FDIC. As the banks' loan portfolios are sold off, the write-downs of the underlying collateral will give bank examiners a new, lower reference price for the collateral held by other banks, possibly tipping those banks into insolvency as well. You get the picture.

That said, the repercussions from the commercial collapse will not be as great as those from the housing sector. The commercial market is considerably smaller than the residential market. The existing FDIC system can handle the decline, which will likely hit smaller banks harder than those in the "too big to fail" bracket. Moreover, fraud was probably much more prevalent in the residential than the commercial

market, where even the newbie investors tend to be financial professionals or established businesspeople, not hustlers looking for a quick flip.

But given how experienced those investors were, why are our problems now as bad as they are? Fraud aside, Gyourko notes that at the height of its bubble, the commercial real-estate market displayed most of the pathologies that characterized the residential side. Only 50 percent of the increase in prices between 2003 and 2008 resulted from rising rents, he says; the rest was just inflated optimism about the rents landlords would be able to charge sometime in the future. And just as in housing, banks joined the folly, increasing the LTVs and requiring less amortization over the life of the loan.

Take the Stuyvesant Town deal. The investors aren't shady subprime lenders or naive kids. Tishman Speyer has been in the real-estate business for decades, and the investors who trusted the firm with their money are sober institutions like the Hartford Financial Services Group and the California Public Employees' Retirement System. Yet according to *The Wall Street Journal*, when Stuyvesant Town was sold, lenders were projecting that the Tishman Speyer-BlackRock partnership would be able to triple its net income in five years through building upgrades and decontrol. That's why the principals paid a premium for the property, and financed the purchase with loans totaling more than 80 percent of the price.

Even before the financial crisis sapped demand in the rental market, this plan was questionable. The buildings simply weren't built as deluxe rentals—the mosaic tile in the public areas has been replaced by marble, but in the cramped vestibules and narrow hallways, the effect isn't luxurious; the buildings just look like they're dressed up for Halloween. With mostly tiny kitchens, and no room in the lobbies for a doorman, these apartments were never going to command the kind of rents that would justify the partnership's bid. Even though many of the apartments have been decontrolled, net income has barely risen.

Besides, anyone who's been in New York long enough to find Zabar's without a map knows that rent-controlled

tenants like to sue, and New York's housing law is notoriously tenant-friendly. Even if the new owners had found tenants willing to pay top dollar, there was a good chance they would never have been allowed to charge it. Game theorists often speak of the "winner's curse": the tendency of auctions to be won by the people who are the most delusionally overoptimistic. It's an apt description of what seems to have happened. Not just to the Tishman group, but to America.

One of the most persistent narratives of the recent crisis portrays a nation of unsophisticated home buyers led astray by greedy bankers. Supposedly those bankers were willing to write risky loans because they intended to pass them on to some unwary investor. But this explanation falters in the face of a legion of failing commercial deals. Prospective landlords had all the expertise they should have needed to put a fair price on properties—and the majority of lenders who were originating loans for their own portfolios had ample incentive to perform careful due diligence.

The best explanation for the calamity that has overtaken us may simply be that cheap money makes us all stupid. The massive inflows of international capital, which Ben Bernanke has called the "global savings glut," poured into our loan markets, driving interest rates lower—and, since most real estate is purchased with borrowed funds, pushing up the price of property in both the commercial and residential sectors. Rising prices, in turn, disguised any potential problems with the borrowers, because if they ran into cash-flow problems, they could always refinance, or sell. Everyone was getting bad signals from the market, and outlandish purchases looked almost rational.

That answer isn't quite satisfying, especially in the face of another financial meltdown. We don't want ambiguity and complex systems; we want heroes, villains, and a happy ending. But by now we should all know that real-estate markets are rarely the stuff of fairy tales. ■

Megan McArdle is *The Atlantic's* business and economics editor, and the editor of the business channel at theatlantic.com.



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Time's Up

Fox's 24 is exquisite nonsense. But can its limerick logic survive in the post-Cheney era?

By James Parker

IN A GENTLER and less frazzled world, a world undistracted by ticking time bombs, breached firewalls, rogue mustaches, and effervescent canisters of bubonic plague, I like to think we'd feel differently about the creators of the espionage marathon 24. Urgency, in my opinion, has confused us as to the character of this remarkable show (now entering its eighth season), and our judgments upon it have been fringed with panic. With the pressure off, however, executive producer Joel Surnow and his writers would be neither hailed as patriotic realists nor damned as Cheneyite running dogs, but recognized soberly and universally as modern masters of a most exacting form: the form, that is, of pure nonsense.

By *nonsense*, to be clear, I don't mean "stuff that doesn't make sense"—the appalling thing about 24, after all, is that *everything* makes sense, *all the time*. I refer rather to the tradition invented by two celibate Victorian Englishmen and

developed by the blackest humorists of 20th-century Europe. Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll might have been terrified at the uses to which nonsense was put by Larry, Kafka, Beckett, Ionesco, and Flann O'Brien—then again, they might not have been. Lear's manic, closed-circuit doggerel; Carroll's nightmare formality; the end was in sight from the very beginning. You start with a limerick, you conclude with a metaphysic: man alone and pants-down absurd in a universe crammed with meanings. No God—they vacuumed him out a while back—just systems, exigencies, formulas, codes, and a lot of running around. The trap, *The Trial*, the Lobster Quadrille: welcome to the office of the Los Angeles Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU).

*There was a man called Jack Bauer
Who saved the whole world in an hour—
With a small home computer
He neutered a shooter
And foiled a malevolent power.*

Special agent Jack Bauer first appeared on our screens in 2001, mere weeks after the attacks of September 11. Played by Kiefer Sutherland—face as worn as a favorite couch, voice like a burning building—he seemed initially a sort of everyman James Bond: he had a wife, Teri, and he had a teenage daughter, the creamy and constantly kidnapped Kim. Working out of CTU, and then dashing about in the field, Jack was obliged to thwart an internationally leveraged assassination attempt on a U.S. senator while simultaneously preserving Kim, and then Teri, from a crew of dope-smoking abductors.

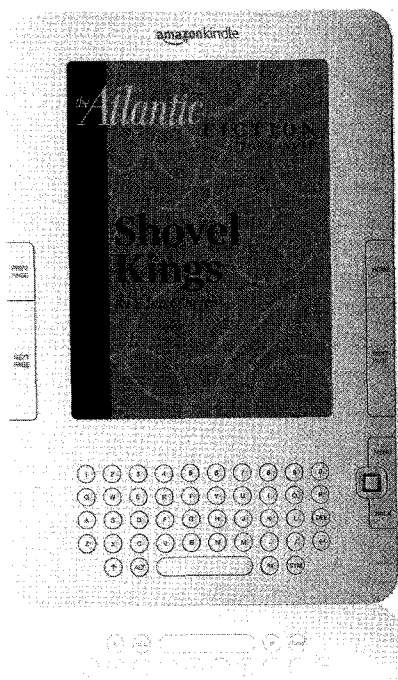
And he had to do it all in 24 hours—the hook of 24, its gimmick, its gotcha. Indifferent to Aristotle's first two unities (unity of action and unity of place), the show's writers are raving absolutists when it comes to his third: unity of *time*. Each season covers a single 24-hour period, and is divided into 24 parts—8:00 to 9:00 a.m., 9:00 to 10:00 a.m., etc. Before and after the commercial break, a

SEAN MCCABE



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the Atlantic

yellow digital readout counts down the seconds. *Bleep! ... Bleep! ...*

This existential brusquerie, this despotism of the present tense, is a hallmark of great nonsense, from the White Rabbit's watch ("Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!") to the clock in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* that strikes now 17, now seven, now three, now not at all. "Events," we are hoarsely advised at the beginning of each season of 24, "occur in real time." But of course, real time is the very last thing it is. If an hour as crazily piled with incident, as racked by good/bad choices, and as saturated with geopolitical import were actually to occur, anywhere within the solar system, the approximate effect would be that of a donut dropped into the Large Hadron Collider: the whole operation would just spark out.

Story lines interweave; the screen splits. Obsessive use is made of the cell phone, which plays in 24 a role analogous to that of the bicycle in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*: "Does Michelle know I'm alive?" "No, not yet. I'll call CTU on my cell so you can talk to her privately ... Bill, Tony wants to talk to Michelle. Can you put her on the line?" "She's not here. I sent her home. I'll find her and patch her through to your cell." Etc. Dilemmas sprint this way and that, tossing their horns. Periodically they put on weight and become quarantaries. Chase, Jack's handsome young partner and prospective son-in-law, has a live bio-bomb locked to his wrist, but he doesn't have the key. One minute 23 seconds to detonation, 1:22 ... Oh dear! Oh dear! Jack and Chase spot the fire ax at the same moment, have the same thought. "*Do it*," urges Chase. (Jack makes sure to wrap the severed hand in cloth.) In Season Five it is suggested that Jack might have gone so far "off protocol" as to have actually killed one of his CTU colleagues. His ex-squeeze Audrey Raines is scandalized: "Jack would *never* murder his friends!" Straight faces are kept, relentlessly. At the CTU office, an open-plan area with the doomy, metallic vibe of the *Battlestar Galactica*, operatives march frowningly about or sit at their stations, all jowly with blue computer glare. Each episode ends with a cliffhanger or a soapy bombshell—as when agent Tony Almeida's ex-wife stalks unexpectedly onto the CTU floor!

Jack is a shape-shifter, a trickster, a will-o'-the-wisp. "This Bauer thing," President David Palmer's chief of staff tells him, "is an illusion, a mirage! Every time you get near it, it moves further away!" A heroin addict (long story) at the beginning of Season Three, panting and vague and asking for a glass of water, Bauer opens Season Five as an oilman in the Mojave Desert. Season Six sees him shuffling in irons off a Chinese transport plane, his tawny captive's mane and beard foreshadowing the Jesus/Aslan role he is about to play: Jack is to be handed over to some terrorists, old enemies of his, whose price for intel about some other terrorists is Jack's head. "Bauer has to be sacrificed so this country can survive!" Is Jack bitter? Hell, no. "To be honest with you," he confides huskily to his ex-CTU boss, "it'll be a relief." ("Is it life?" asks O'Brien's Martin Finnucane. "I would rather be without it ...")

If you have a spare 24 hours, watch Season Two. Here context is supplied by a loose nuke on the streets of L.A., and Jack is appropriately off-the-charts. "Inactive" as the show begins, with flickering eyes and a bum's habits, he's back in business within 45 minutes. At CTU a fat villain isn't cooperating, so Jack takes him out. Bang! One in the chest. Then—"I'm gonna need a hacksaw!"—he chops off the villain's head. (Somewhere the Queen of Hearts is licking her lips.) President Palmer wants to trade intel with some dodgy foreigners. The director of the NSA voices the concern that this might set "a dangerous precedent." "We can't worry about precedent," rumbles the prez. "Not today. Not under the threat of a nuclear attack." That's the spirit. No precedents and no principles, just the peremptory demands of the moment: the nonsense imperative. Human rights, naturally, go by the board. Dragging a couple of suspects into CTU for interrogation, Tony Almeida wonders aloud how hard he can push them. "Hard as you have to," he is told. "Stick bamboo shoots under their fingernails. Get what they got."

24's torture scenes are infamous, and have been taken as an endorsement of the Bush administration's well-documented excursion into "the dark side." Indeed, executive producer Joel

Surnow has blowharded quite happily to that effect: "America wants the war on terror fought by Jack Bauer," he told *The New Yorker* in 2007. "He's a patriot." Jack uses patriotic electricity, patriotic towels, patriotic sharp instruments. In Season Five, it looks for a minute as if he's going to have to patriotically torture the president. The human body is the information source on 24: a dying person with undischarged intel must be revived with hypodermics or buzzing paddles. Or maybe Jack can pry a microchip from the still-warm corpse. As Season Seven begins, he's up on Capitol Hill, getting grilled by a pinko senator: "Basically what you're saying, Mr. Bauer, is that the ends justify the means, and that you are above the law!" "When I am *ac-ti-vated*," enunciates Jack with harsh precision (screw this guy!), "when I am brought into a situation, there is a reason. And that reason is to complete the objective of my mission *at all costs*."

But in all of this, 24 is only showing its devotion to the canons of nonsense, within whose tradition the abuse of persons has always occupied a hallowed place. Lear's limericks are a catalogue of thumpings, beatings, smashings, knockings-about, and shuttings-in-boxes, accompanied by plenty of screaming; Père Ubu, in Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, slobberingly consigns his enemies to the Debraining Machine; Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* is hauled about on an Abu Ghraib-style leash. In *The Third Policeman*, reality itself gets a bit of enhanced interrogation, as a beam of light is put through a mangle by Policeman MacCruiskeen, rolled and crushed until an awful, indecipherable shout is heard. ("I have been listening to shouts and screams for years," says the clinical MacCruiskeen, "but I can never surely catch the words. Would you say that he said 'Don't press so hard'?")

Cheneyism provided the perfect cover for flat-out nonsense, but Season Eight of 24 arrives conspicuously in the era of Obama—in what we hopefully, wistfully perhaps, think of as the post-torture era. What now for Jack? Kinder and gentler? Protocol-friendly? He can't go soft, he just can't. It wouldn't make sense. ■

James Parker is an Atlantic contributing editor.

By Michael Kinsley

Fewer than half the words in this opening sentence are devoted to saying what happened. If someone saw you reading the paper and asked, "So what's going on?" you would not likely begin by saying that President Obama had won a hard-fought victory. You would say, "The House passed health-care reform last night." And maybe, "It was a close vote." And just possibly, "There was a kerfuffle about abortion." You would not likely refer to "a sweeping overhaul of the nation's health care system," as if your friend was unaware that health-care reform was going on.

Nor would you feel the need to inform your friend first thing that unnamed Democrats were bragging about what a big deal this is—an unsurprising development if ever there was one.

Once upon a time, this unnecessary stuff was considered an advance over dry news reporting: don't just tell the story; tell the reader what it means. But providing "context," as it was known, has become an invitation to hype. In this case, it's the lowest form of hype—it's horse-race hype—which actually diminishes a story rather than enhancing it. Surely if this event is such a big, big deal—"sweeping" and "defining" its way into our awareness—then its effect on the next election is one of the less important things about it. There's an old joke about the provincial newspaper that reports a nuclear attack on the nation's largest city under the headline "Local Man Dies in NY Nuclear Holocaust." Something similar happens at the national level, where everything is filtered through politics. ("In what was widely seen as a setback for Democrats just a year before the midterm elections, nuclear bombs yesterday obliterated seven states, five of which voted for President Obama in the last election ...")

It could be worse. Here is *The Washington Post's* lead on the same health-care story:

Hours after President Obama exhorted Democratic lawmakers to "answer the call of history," the House hit an unprecedented milestone on the path to health-care reform, approving a trillion-dollar package late Saturday that seeks to overhaul private insurance practices and guarantee comprehensive and affordable coverage to almost every American.

Give *The Post* points for at least attempting to say what the bill does, but take them away again for the bungled milestone metaphor (you don't "hit" a milestone if you hope to reach the next one), and for allowing Obama to fill the first 13 words of the piece with tired rhetoric. The *Times* piece, by contrast, waits until the third paragraph to quote Representative George Miller, who said, "This is our moment to revolutionize health care in this country." That is undeniably true. If there was

ever a moment to revolutionize health care, it would be the moment when legislation revolutionizing health care has just passed. But is this news? Did anybody say to anybody else, "Wait'll you hear what George Miller just said"? The quote is 11 words, while identifying Miller takes 16. And there's more:

"Now is the chance to fix our health care system and improve the lives of millions of Americans," Representative Louise M. Slaughter, Democrat of New York and chairwoman of the Rules Committee, said as she opened the daylong proceedings.

(Quote: 18 words; identification: 21 words.)

Meanwhile, Republicans oppose the bill. Yes, they do. And if you haven't surmised this from the duly reported fact that all but one of them voted against it, perhaps you will find another quote informative.

"More taxes, more spending and more government is not the plan for reform the people support," said Representative Virginia Foxx, Republican of North Carolina and one of the conservatives who relentlessly criticized the Democrats' plan.

(Quote: 16 words; identification, 19 words.)

Quotes from outside experts or observers are also a rich source of unnecessary verbiage in newspaper articles. Another *New York Times* story from the November 8 front page provides a good example here. It's about how the crackdown on some Wall Street bonuses may have backfired. Executives were forced to take stock instead of cash, but then the stock went up, damn it. This is an "enterprise" story—one the reporter or an editor came up with, not one dictated by events. And the reporter clearly views the information it contains as falling somewhere between ironic and appalling, which seems about right. But it's not her job to have a view. In fact, it's her job to *not* have a view. Even though it's her story and her judgment, she must find someone else—an expert or an observer—to repeat and endorse her conclusion. These quotes then magically turn an opinionated story into an objective one. And so:

"People have to look at the sizable gains that have been made since stock and options were granted last year, and the fact is this was, in many ways, a windfall," said Jesse M. Brill, the chairman of CompensationStandards.com, a trade publication. "This had nothing to do with people's performance. These were granted at market lows."

Those are 56 words spent allowing Jesse M. Brill to restate the author's point. Yet I, for one, have never heard of Jesse M. Brill before. He may be a fine fellow. But I have no particular reason to trust him, and he has no particular reason to need my trust. *The New York Times*, on the other hand, does need my trust, or it is out of business. So it has a strong incentive to earn my trust every day (which it does, with rare and historic exceptions). But instead of asking me to trust it and its reporter about the thesis of this piece, *The New York Times* asks me to trust this person I have never heard of, Jesse M. Brill.

Of course this attempt to pass the hot potato to a total stranger doesn't work, because before I can trust Jesse M. Brill about the thesis of the piece, I have to trust *The New York Times* that this Jesse M. Brill person is trustworthy, and the article under examination devotes many words to telling me who he is so that I will trust him. (By contrast, it tells me nothing about the reporter.) Why not cut out the middleman? The reason to trust this story, if you choose to do so, is that it is in *The New York Times*. What Jesse M. Brill may think adds nothing. Yet he is only one of several experts quoted throughout, basically telling the story all over again.

In the current financial crisis, *The New York Times* and other papers seem to have given reporters more leeway than ever before to express their opinions directly. Editors may have realized that these issues are hard enough to explain without running into roadblocks at every turn labeled WARNING: OPINION TERRITORY AHEAD. But the old wordy conventions survive. Quotes from strangers restating the reporter's opinion are one. Another is adding protective qualifiers to statements about which there is

no real doubt (as when I wrote above that the bonus restrictions “may have” backfired). A third—illustrated by the headline on that story, “Windfall Seen as Bonuses Are Paid in Stock”—is to attribute the article’s conclusion to unnamed others. Somebody sees a windfall. We’re just telling you about it.

The software industry has a concept known as “legacy code,” meaning old stuff that is left in software programs, even after they are revised and updated, so that they will still work with older operating systems. The equivalent exists in newspaper stories, which are written to accommodate readers who have just emerged from a coma or a coal mine. Who needs to be told that reforming health care (three words) involves “a sweeping overhaul of the nation’s health care system” (nine words)? Who needs to be reminded that Hillary Clinton tried this in her husband’s administration without success? Anybody who doesn’t know these things already is unlikely to care. (Is, in fact, unlikely to be reading the article.)

Then there is “inverted-pyramid style”—an image I have never quite understood—which stands for the principle of putting the most-crucial information at the top of a story and leaving the details for below. Pyramid style is regarded as a bit old-fashioned these days, hence all those florid subordinate clauses at the top of both the *Times* and the *Post* versions of the health-care story. The revolt against pyramid style is also why you get those you’ll-never-guess-what-this-is-about, faux-mystery narrative leads about Martha Lewis, a 57-year-old retired nurse, who was sitting in her living room one day last month watching *Oprah* when the FedEx delivery man rang her doorbell with an innocent-looking envelope ... and so on. (The popularity of this device is puzzling, since the headline—“Oprah Arrested in FedEx Anthrax Plot”—generally gives the story away.) But ruthless adherence to classic inverted-pyramid style can also lead to repetition of the story again and again, with one or two more nuggets of information each time.

And then, finally, comes the end, or “tag.” Few writers can resist the lure of closure—some form of summing-up or leave-taking. Often this is a quote that repeats the central point one last time, perhaps combining it with some rueful irony about the limits of human agency. The *Times* health-care article does this. “‘Our plan is not perfect, but it is a good start toward providing affordable health care to all Americans,’ said Representative Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon.” The same day’s story in *The Post* does it too, with a quote too long to quote.

On the first day of my first real job in journalism—on the copy desk at the *Royal Oak Daily Tribune* in Royal Oak, Michigan—the chief copy editor said, “Remember, every word you cut saves the publisher money.” At the time, saving the publisher money didn’t strike me as the world’s noblest ideal. These days, for anyone in journalism, it’s more compelling. ■

Michael Kinsley is a columnist for The Atlantic. He is also the editor of a new Web site to be launched early this year by The Atlantic’s parent company.



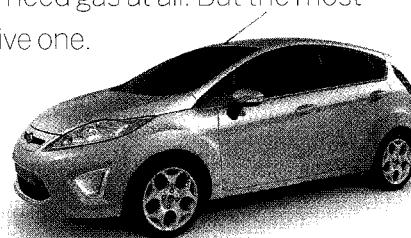
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IS AMERICA GOING TO HELL? After a year of economic calamity that many fear has sent us into irreversible decline, the author finds reassurance in the peculiarly American cycle of crisis and renewal, and in the continuing strength of the forces that have made the country great: our university system, our receptiveness to immigration, our culture of innovation. In most significant ways, the U.S. remains the envy of the world. But here's the alarming problem: our governing system is old and broken and dysfunctional. Fixing it—without resorting to a constitutional convention or a coup—is the key to securing the nation's future.

How AMERICA Can Rise Again

By James Fallows

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SEAMUS MURPHY

SINCE COMING BACK to the United States after three years away in China, I have been asking experts around the country whether America is finally going to hell. The question is partly a joke. One look at the comforts and abundance of American life—even during a recession, even with all the people who are suffering or left out—can make it seem silly to ask about anything except the secrets of the country's success. Here is the sort of thing you notice anew after being in India or China, the two rising powers of the day: there is still so much nature, and so much space, available for each person on American soil. Room on the streets and sidewalks, big lawns around the houses, trees to walk under, wildflowers at the edge of town—yes, despite the sprawl and overbuilding. A few days after moving from our apartment in Beijing, I awoke to find a mother deer and two fawns in the front yard of our house in Washington, barely three miles from the White House. I know that deer are a modern pest, but the contrast with blighted urban China, in which even pigeons are scarce, was difficult to ignore.

And the people! The typical American I see in an office building or shopping mall, stout or slim, gives off countless

unconscious signs—hair, skin, teeth, height—of having grown up in a society of taken-for-granted sanitation, vaccination, ample protein, and overall public health. I have learned not to bore people with my expressions of amazement at the array of food in ordinary grocery stores, the size and newness of cars on the street, the splendor of the physical plant for universities, museums, sports stadiums. And honestly, by now I've almost stopped noticing. But if this is "decline," it is from a level that most of the world still envies.

The idea of "finally" going to hell is a modest joke too. Through the entirety of my conscious life, America has been on the brink of ruination, or so we have heard, from the launch of *Sputnik* through whatever is the latest indication of national falling apart or falling behind. Pick a year over the past half century, and I will supply an indicator of what at the time seemed a major turning point for the worse. The first oil shocks and gas-station lines in peacetime history; the first presidential resignation ever; assassinations and riots; failing schools; failing industries; polarized politics; vulgarized culture; polluted air and water; divisive and inconclusive wars. It all seemed so terrible, during a period defined in retrospect as a time of unquestioned American strength. "Through the 1970s, people seemed ready to conclude that the world was



coming to an end at the drop of a hat," Rick Perlstein, the author of *Nixonland*, told me. "Thomas Jefferson was probably sure the country was going to hell when John Adams supported the Alien and Sedition Acts," said Gary Hart, the former Democratic senator and presidential candidate. "And Adams was sure it was going to hell when Thomas Jefferson was elected president."

But the question wasn't simply a joke. Through the final year I spent in China, in which the collapse of the U.S. financial system was blamed for half the bad things happening in that country, I got used to hearing sentences that began "With U.S. power on the wane ..." or "In a post-American world ..." From Australia I have just received an invitation similar to many others I have heard about. The conveners began, "We would like to develop a session we have tentatively titled 'America: In Decline?'" I also heard from Chinese and other foreigners who look at America with an analytic eye and find it wanting. Just as the material bounty of America is more dramatic on return to the country, so are areas of backwardness or erosion you do not notice unless you've been somewhere else. Cell-phone coverage, for instance. In other developed countries, and for that matter most developing countries I've visited, you simply don't have the dead spots and dropped calls that are endemic in America. There are reasons for the difference: China, in which I never lost a signal when on subways, in elevators, or even in a coal mine, has limited competition among phone companies that coordinate to blanket the country with transmitters. Still, this is one of several modern-tech areas in which the U.S. is now notably, even embarrassingly, behind. I went several times to a

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remnants—dimly lit museums, once-stately homes, public buildings overdue for repair—from a time when the society had bigger dreams and more resources than it could muster in the here and now. A Chinese friend who flew for the first time from Beijing to New York phoned soon after landing

to complain about the potholed, traffic-jammed taxi ride from JFK to Manhattan. "When I was growing up, these bridges and roads and dams were a source of real national pride and achievement," Stephen Flynn, the president of the Center for National Policy in Washington, who was born in 1960, told me. "My daughter was 6 when the World Trade Center towers went down, 8 when lights went off on the East Coast, 10 when a major U.S. city drowned—I saw things built, and she's

seen them fall apart." America is supposed to be the permanent country of the New, but a lot of it just looks old.

Since everyone knows that America's passenger-rail system is a world laggard, there is no surprise value in saying so. But it's still true. Stephen Flynn points out that the physical infrastructure of big East Coast cities was mainly built by the 1880s; of the industrial Midwest by World War I; and of the West Coast by 1960. "It was advertised to last 50 years, and overengineered so it might last 100," he said. "Now it's running down. When a pothole swallows an SUV, it's treated as freak news, but it shows a water system that's literally collapsing beneath us." (Surface cave-ins often reflect a sewer or water line that has leaked or collapsed below.)

At a dinner in Washington this fall, I heard a comment that summed up the combination of satisfaction and concern that ran through many of the interviews I held. The day before

the dinner, three U.S. citizens had been named the winners of the Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine. The day after, three more would be named winners of the Nobel Prize for physics. All the more impressive for America's attractive power, four of the six winners had been born outside the country—in China, Canada, Australia, England—and had taken U.S. citizenship, in some cases jointly with their original coun-

try, while they trained and did work at U.S. or other foreign institutions. The dinner discussion topic was the future of America's scientific-research base—and the prize announcement, rather than a cause for celebration, was taken almost as a knell. "This was for work done 10 or 20 years ago, based on research funding that started 30 or 40 years ago," the main speaker, the CEO of a famous Silicon Valley firm, said. "I don't know what we're funding that will pay off 30 years from now."

"After almost a century, the United States no longer has the money," the economists J. Bradford DeLong and Stephen Cohen, both of Berkeley, write in their new book, *The End of Influence*.

It is gone, and it is not likely to return in the foreseeable future ... The American standard of living will decline relative to the rest of the industrialized and industrializing world ... The United States will lose power and influence.

Declinism is woven into our culture.

"Thomas Jefferson was sure the country was going to hell when John Adams supported the Alien and Sedition Acts. And Adams was sure it was going to hell when Jefferson was elected."

private medical clinic in Beijing and once to a public hospital in Shanghai (the Skin Disease and Sexually Transmitted Disease Hospital—it's a long story). In each, the nurses entered my information at a computer, rather than having me fill out the paper forms, on a clipboard, on which I have entered the same redundant information a thousand times in American medical offices. Again, there's a reason for the difference; but we're not keeping up.

When I was a schoolboy in California in the 1950s and '60s, the freeways were new and big and smooth—like the new roads being built all across China. Today's California freeways are cracked and crowded and old. A Chinese student I knew in Shanghai who has recently entered graduate school at UC Berkeley sent me a note saying that the famous San Francisco Bay Area seemed "beautiful, but run down." I remember a similar reaction on arriving at graduate school in England in the 1970s and seeing the sad physical

This judgment differed from many others I heard mainly in being more crisply put.

So the question is: Are the fears of this moment our era's version of the "missile gap"? Are they anything more than a combination of the two staple ingredients of doom-and-darkness statements through the whole course of our history? One of those ingredients is exaggerated complaint by whichever group is out of political power—those who thought America should be spelled with a "k" under Nixon or Reagan, those who attend "tea bag" rallies against the Obama administration now. The other is what historians call the bracing "jeremiad" tradition of harsh warnings that reveal a faith that America can be better than it is. Football coaches roar and storm in their locker-room speeches at halftime to fire up the team, and American politicians, editorialists, and activists of various sorts have roared and stormed precisely because they have known this is the way the nation is roused to action.

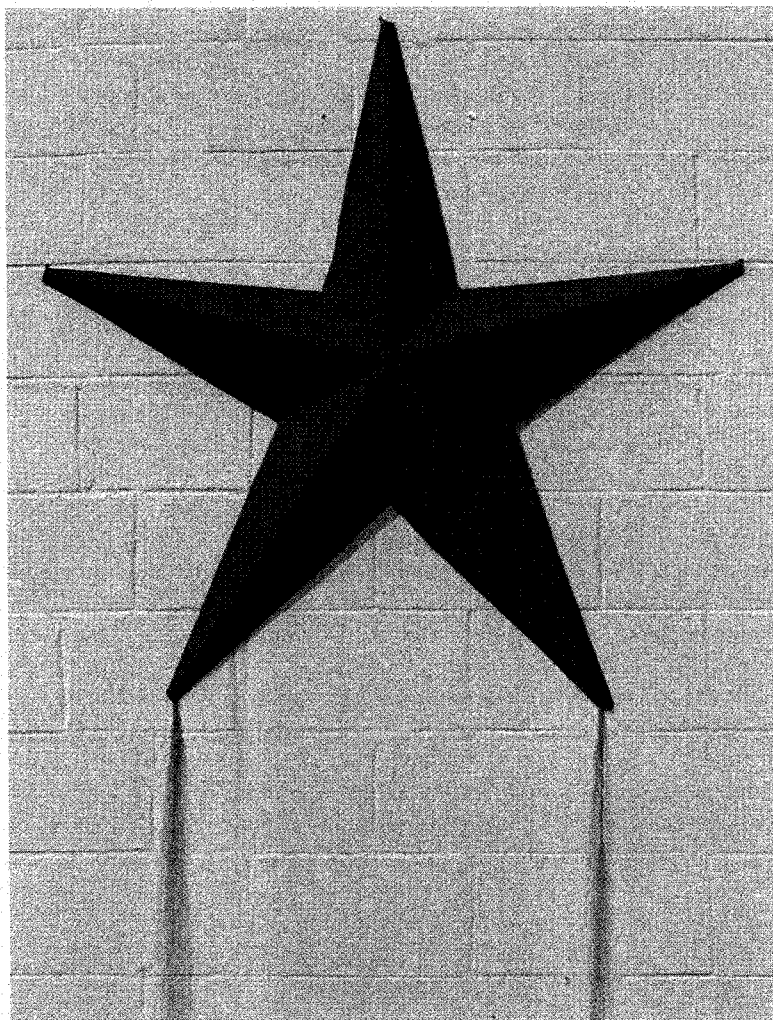
Today's fears combine relative decline—what will happen when China has all the jobs? and all the money?—with domestic concerns about a polarized society of haves and have-nots that has lost its connective core. They include concerns about the institutions that have made America strong: widespread education, a financially viable press, religion that can coexist with secularism, government that expresses the nation's divisions while also addressing its long-term interests and needs. They are topped by the most broadly held alarm about the future of the natural environment since the era of *Silent Spring* and the original Earth Day movement.

How should we feel? I spoke with historians and politicians, soldiers and ministers, civil engineers and broadcast executives and high-tech researchers. Overall, the news they gave was heartening—and alarming, too. Most of the things that worry Americans aren't really that serious, especially those that involve "falling behind" anyone else. But there is a deeper problem almost too alarming to worry about, since it is so hard to see a solution. Let's start with the good news.

ONE REASON NOT TO WORRY: WE HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE

Three years ago, Cullen Murphy published *Are We Rome?*, a book that asked a version of the question that has run through American political discussion for at least 200 years. Murphy, a former editor of this magazine, gave the only sensible answer, which amounted to "Maybe." When I spoke with him recently, he emphasized how much the current wave of "declinist" worry matches a tradition that has been an inseparable part of American strength.

"If you go back and pick any decade in American history, you are guaranteed to find the exact same worries we have now," he said. "About our commercial capacities, about the



education system, about whether immigrants are ruining our stock and not learning English, about what is happening to the 'real' values that built the country. Poke a stick into it, and you will get a gushing fount of commentary on the same subjects as now, in the same angry and despairing tone. It's an amazingly consistent trait.

"Fifty years from now, Americans will be as worried as they are today," Murphy said. "And meanwhile the basic social dynamism of the country will continue to wash us forward in the messy, roiling way it always has."

Ralph Nader, for whom I worked as a researcher in my teens and early 20s, and from whom I became estranged after his 2000 run for the presidency, made a similar upbeat point in a recent reconciliation conversation in Washington. First he elaborated the ways that Congress, the media, the regulators, and both political parties were more in thrall to corporate power than ever before in his memory. But, he said, "you've got to be very careful about thinking things can't rebound. My favorite phrase is 'America is a country that has more problems than it deserves, and more solutions than it applies.' We don't want to be Pollyannas, but we really should believe that we can turn things around."

In *The American Jeremiad*, his classic 1978 account of that phenomenon, Sacvan Bercovitch, of Harvard, points out that from the very start of European settlement in New England, colonists were warned that God was disappointed in them,

so they should improve not just their individual ethics but their collective social behavior. Indeed, only six years after the *Arbella* brought John Winthrop to Massachusetts, a Congregationalist minister was lamenting the lost golden age of the colony, asking parishioners, "Are all [God's] kindnesses forgotten? all your promises forgotten?"

Bercovitch traces how this theme persisted through the centuries that followed, reaching its literary high point in the portrayal of 19th-century America in *The Education of Henry Adams*, to which I would add the 20th-century summit, George Kennan's *Memoirs*. Bercovitch also explains the theme's important political effect. "The jeremiad played a central role in the war of independence, and the war in turn confirmed the jeremiad as a national ritual." It was a national as opposed to a purely religious ritual, because the warnings were intended—and expected—to provoke a cleansing public response. Through the 1800s, "American Jeremiahs considered it their chief duty to make continuing revolution an appeal for national consensus," Bercovitch wrote. Americans had to be told that they were *this far* from doom before they would address problems.

In his recent book about Jimmy Carter's now-ridiculed "malaise" speech in 1979, *What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?*, Kevin Mattson, of Ohio University, says that initially the speech was well received, as most jeremiads are. (I worked earlier as Carter's White House speechwriter but had left by that time.) The speech, which did not include the word

to the presidency, David Plouffe, his campaign manager, describes how Obama struck a similarly resonant chord (minus the Cabinet turmoil) at an important moment in the campaign. At 11 p.m., as the last candidate speaking at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Des Moines two months before the Iowa caucuses, Obama held a crowd rapt with a jeremiad calling for national rebirth and reform. "The dream that so many generations fought for feels as if it's slowly slipping away," he said. "And most of all, we've lost faith that our leaders can or will do anything about it." The crowd went wild.

The expectation of jeremiad is so deeply ingrained in Americans' political consciousness that it might seem to be universal. In fact, most historical accounts suggest this is a peculiar trait of our invented political culture. I recall, from living in both Japan and England, mordant remarks about the fecklessness of public officials, but many fewer "we have lost our country" broadsides of the sort that Americans have long taken for granted.

T. Jackson Lears, of Rutgers, has written two influential books that discuss American cycles of despair and renewal in the 19th and 20th centuries: *No Place of Grace* and *Rebirth of a Nation*. "Historically, the prospect of imminent decline has been used as a rallying cry, to get Americans committed to whatever is the agenda of the person doing the rallying, often the elites," he told me. He added that while much of today's "free-floating populist anger" reminded him strongly of the mood of the 1890s, in light of the long history of such

concerns, "we can rightly raise a skeptical eyebrow at the shrillest predictions of imminent catastrophe."

Nearly 400 years of overstated warnings do not mean that today's Jeremiahs will be proved wrong. And of course any discussion of American problems in any era must include the disclaimer: the Civil War was worse. But these alarmed

calls to action are something we do to ourselves—usually with good effect. Especially because of the world financial crisis, "we have seen palpable declines in the middle class's standing and its sense of security for the future," Jackson Lears said. "I think that was a good deal of what was behind Obama's election—that same longing for rebirth that we have seen in other eras. It is rooted in the familiar Protestant longing for salvation, but is adaptable to secular arenas. Obama was basically riding to victory as part of a politics of regeneration." Barack Obama's very high popularity ratings just after the election suggest that even those who now oppose him and his policies recognized the potential for a new start.

It was recognized overseas as well. Shortly before the election, I interviewed a senior Chinese government official in Beijing. He would not speak on the record about U.S. politics, and he noted that since the time of Nixon, Democratic presidents had been more troublesome for China to deal with than Republicans. But he said, "We view this"—meaning the possibility of Obama's election—"as a test of whether America can change course. It is a remarkable strength of your country." This fall in Sydney, the head of an investment bank laid out for me the ways that profligate spending in the United States had brought the world close to financial disaster, and the

There is no reason for America to feel depressed about the natural emergence of China, India, and others as world powers. America will be better off if China does well than if it flounders.

"malaise," was officially called "A Crisis of Confidence" and warned that Americans had lost their way. Carter began by reciting a list of immediate crises and then said: "It's clear that the true problems of our nation are much deeper ... The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us." He enumerated these "true problems" in painful detail. For instance, "We remember when the phrase 'sound as a dollar' was an expression of absolute dependability." The speech is shocking to read 30 years later, for how closely its diagnosis of American problems matches today's bleak national self-assessment, from the dispiriting partisan gridlock of politics to the crippling dependence on foreign oil. (One obvious difference is that Carter does not mention China at all, let alone as a more successful rival.) In retrospect, his grim tone might seem the reason Carter was turned out of office the next year. But in its time, this was what voters wanted to hear. "It prompted an overwhelmingly favorable response," Mattson wrote after his book came out. "Carter received a whopping 11 percent rise in his poll numbers." It is remembered as a failure not because Americans of the time rejected a tough-love appeal but because two days later Carter asked his Cabinet members to resign, creating an air of political chaos. In *The Audacity to Win*, his recent memoir of Barack Obama's drive



future problems that would be created by America's looming federal deficits. Then he said, "And we will look on in awe as you avoid catastrophe at the last moment—again."

"Why has the United States been so resilient?" Michael Kazin, a historian at Georgetown University, asked rhetorically, after enumerating previous waves of concern about American "decline." He listed many factors, including the good luck of geography and resources, the First Amendment's success in reducing religious and sectarian friction, and the decentralization of power and culture. "There's no Paris, no Rome—a city where a general strike could bring the whole country to a halt." But like Lears and the writer Garry Wills, Kazin was at pains to challenge today's declinism on its own terms, pointing out the successes of recent American history. "Racial relations, the major problem in our history, are better than they have ever been before," he said. "Religious tolerance is better. Anti-immigrant feelings do not come close to the levels of the 1840s, 1890s, or 1920s. Political decline? The level of participation is higher than it used to be, especially in the last election."

Garry Wills listed his concerns about the militarization of American public life (the subject of his recent book, *Bomb Power*) and the vitriol of today's political/cultural divisions. But he added: "When people say how bad things are, I always emphasize that we have never in our history been so good on human rights. The rights of women, gays, the disabled, Native Americans, Hispanics—all of those have soared in the last 40 years." Even the "birther" and "tea bag" movements are indirect evidence of progress, Wills said. "They are reactions to a really great achievement. We did elect a black president. Not many people thought that was possible, even two or three years ago." Of course Wills's list of achievements

is, for some, evidence of what has been "taken" from them in recent history. The point for now is that their concern is part of a strong national tradition, as is the fluidity that gave rise to it. If we weren't worried about our future, then we should really start to worry.

ANOTHER REASON NOT TO WORRY: THE IRRELEVANCE OF "FALLING BEHIND"

In one important way, the jeremiads I have heard since childhood are not part of the great American tradition. Starting with *Sputnik*, when I was in grade school, they have involved comparisons with an external rival or enemy. "Whether you like it or not, history is on our side," Nikita Khrushchev said to Western diplomats in 1956. "We will bury you." After the Soviet Union came the Japanese and the Germans; and now China, or occasionally India, as the standard whose achievements dramatize what America has not done.

This is new. Only with America's emergence as a global power after World War II did the idea of American "decline" routinely involve falling behind someone else. Before that, it meant falling short of expectations—God's, the Founders', posterity's—or of the previous virtues of America in its lost, great days. "The new element in the '50s was the constant comparison with the Soviets," Michael Kazin told me. Since then, external falling-behind comparisons have become not just a staple of American self-assessment but often a crutch. If we are concerned about our schools, it is because children are learning more in Singapore or India; about the development of clean-tech jobs, because it's happening faster in China.

Having often lived outside the United States since the 1970s, I have offered my share of falling-behind analyses, including a book-length comparison of Japanese and American

strengths (*More Like Us*) 20 years ago. But at this point in America's national life cycle, I think the exercise is largely a distraction, and that Americans should concentrate on what are, finally, our own internal issues to resolve or ignore.

Naturally there are lessons to draw from other countries' practices and innovations; the more we know about the outside world the better, as long as we're collecting information calmly rather than glancing nervously at our reflected foreign image. For instance, if you have spent any time in places where tipping is frowned on or rare, like Japan or Australia, you view the American model of day-long small bribes, rather than one built-in full price, as something similar to baksheesh, undignified for all concerned.

Naturally, too, it's easier to draw attention to a domestic problem and build support for a solution if you cast the issue in us-versus-them terms, as a response to an outside threat. In *If We Can Put a Man on the Moon ...*, their new book about making government programs more effective, William Eggers and John O'Leary emphasize the military and Cold War imperatives behind America's space program. "The race to the moon was a contest between two systems of government," they wrote, "and the question would be settled not by debate but by who could best execute on this endeavor." Falling-behind arguments have proved convenient and powerful in other countries, too.

But whatever their popularity or utility in other places at other times, falling-behind concerns seem too common in America now. As I have thought about why overreliance on this device increasingly bothers me, I have realized that it's because my latest stretch out of the country has left me less and less interested in whether China or some other country is "overtaking" America. The question that matters is not

has been a blight on British politics, though it has inspired some memorable, melancholy literature. There is no reason for America to feel depressed about the natural emergence of China, India, and others as world powers. But second, and more important, America may have reasons to feel actively optimistic about its prospects in purely relative terms.

THE CRUCIAL AMERICAN ADVANTAGE

Let's start with the more modest claim, that China has ample reason to worry about its own future. Will the long-dreaded day of reckoning for Chinese development finally arrive because of environmental disaster? Or via the demographic legacy of the one-child policy, which will leave so many parents and grandparents dependent on so relatively few young workers? Minxin Pei, who grew up in Shanghai and now works at Claremont McKenna College, in California, has predicted in *China's Trapped Transition* that within the next few years, tension between an open economy and a closed political system will become unendurable, and an unreformed Communist bureaucracy will finally drag down economic performance.

America will be better off if China does well than if it flounders. A prospering China will mean a bigger world economy with more opportunities and probably less turmoil—and a China likely to be more cooperative on environmental matters. But whatever happens to China, prospects could soon brighten for America. The American culture's particular strengths could conceivably be about to assume new importance and give our economy new pep. International networks will matter more with each passing year. As the one truly universal nation, the United States continually refreshes its connections with the rest of the world—through languages,

family, education, business—in a way no other nation does, or will. The countries that are comparably open—Canada, Australia—aren't nearly as large; those whose economies are comparably large—Japan, unified Europe, eventually China or India—aren't nearly as open. The simplest measure of whether a culture is dominant is

That is the American tragedy of the early 21st century: a vital and self-renewing culture that attracts the world's talent, and a governing system that increasingly looks like a joke.

whether America is "falling behind" but instead something like John Winthrop's original question of whether it is falling short—or even falling apart. This is not the mainstream American position now, so let me explain.

First is the simple reality that one kind of "decline" is inevitable and therefore not worth worrying about. China has about four times as many people as America does. Someday its economy will be larger than ours. Fine! A generation ago, its people produced, on average, about one-sixteenth as much as Americans did; now they produce about one-sixth. That change is a huge achievement for China—and a plus rather than a minus for everyone else, because a business-minded China is more benign than a miserable or rebellious one. When the Chinese produce one-quarter as much as Americans per capita, as will happen barring catastrophe, their economy will become the world's largest. This will be good for them but will not mean "falling behind" for us. We know that for more than a century, the consciousness of decline

whether outsiders want to be part of it. At the height of the British Empire, colonial subjects from the Raj to Malaya to the Caribbean modeled themselves in part on Englishmen: Nehru and Lee Kuan Yew went to Cambridge, Gandhi, to University College, London. Ho Chi Minh wrote in French for magazines in Paris. These days the world is full of businesspeople, bureaucrats, and scientists who have trained in the United States.

Today's China attracts outsiders too, but in a particular way. Many go for business opportunities; or because of cultural fascination; or, as my wife and I did, to be on the scene where something truly exciting was under way. The Haidian area of Beijing, seat of its universities, is dotted with the faces of foreigners who have come to master the language and learn the system. But true immigrants? People who want their children and grandchildren to grow up within this system? Although I met many foreigners who hope to stay in China indefinitely, in three years I encountered only two

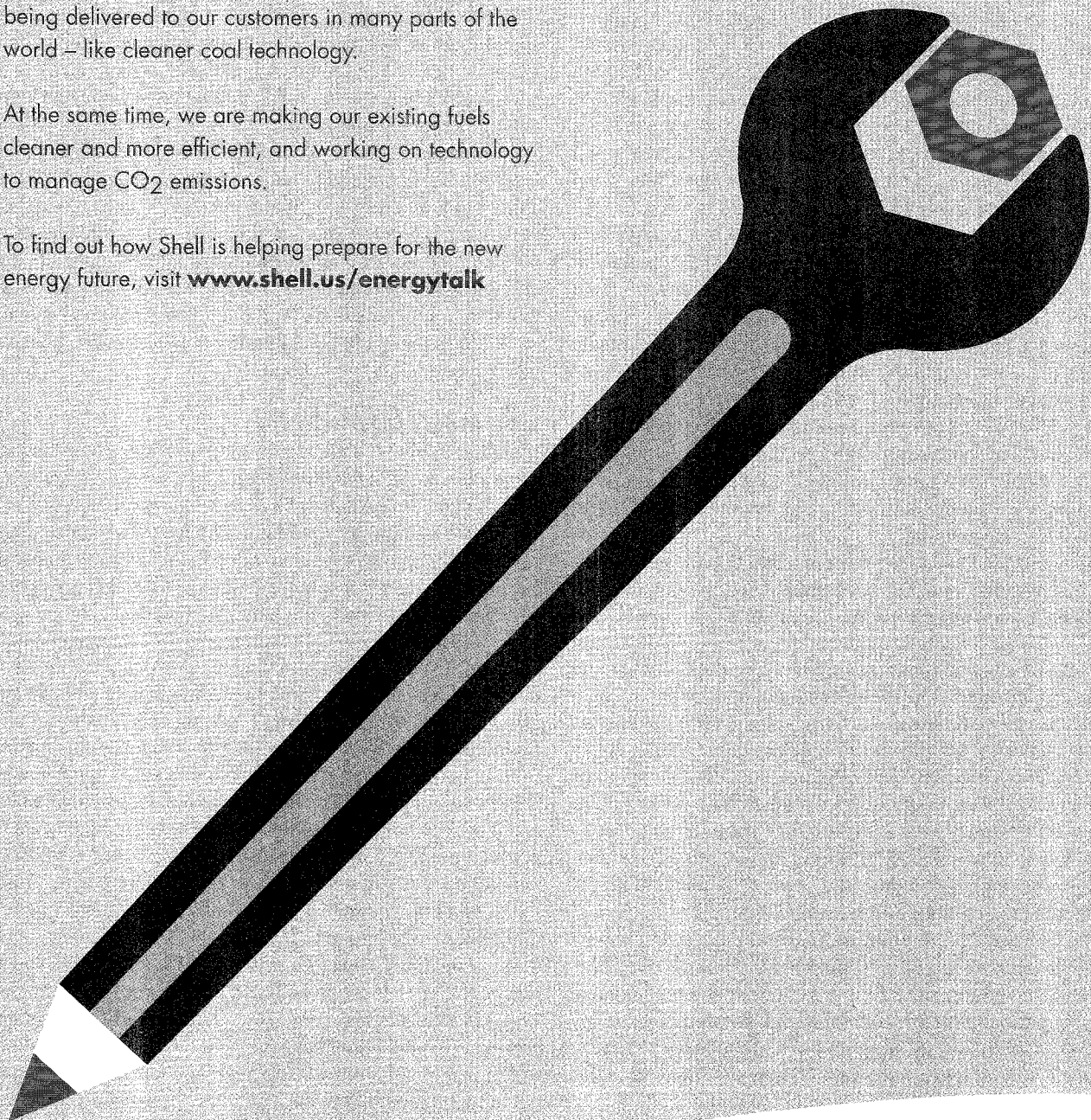
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people who aspired to citizenship in the People's Republic. From the physical rigors of a badly polluted and still-developing country, to the constraints on free expression and dissent, to the likely ongoing mediocrity of a university system that emphasizes volume of output over independence or excellence of research, the realities of China heavily limit the appeal of becoming Chinese. Because of its scale and internal diversity, China (like India) is a more racially open society than, say, Japan or Korea. But China has come nowhere near the feats of absorption and opportunity that make up much of America's story, and it is very difficult to imagine that it could do so—well, ever.

Everything we know about future industries and technologies suggests that they will offer ever-greater rewards to flexibility, openness, reinvention, “crowdsourcing,” and all other manifestations of individuals and groups keenly attuned to their surroundings. Everything about American society should be hospitable toward those traits—and should foster them better and more richly than other societies can. The American advantage here is broad and atmospheric, but it also depends on two specific policies that, in my view, are the absolute pillars of American strength: continued openness to immigration, and a continued concentration of universities that people around the world want to attend.

Maybe I was biased in how I listened, but in my interviews, I thought I could tell which Americans had spent significant time outside the country or working on international “competitiveness” issues. If they had, they predictably emphasized those same two elements of long-term American advantage. “My favorite statistic is that one-quarter of the members of the National Academy of Sciences were born abroad,” I was told by Harold Varmus, the president of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and himself an academy member (and Nobel Prize winner). “We may not be so good on the pipeline of producing new scientists, but the country is still a very effective magnet.”

“We scream about our problems, but as long as we have the immigrants, and the universities, we’ll be fine,” James McGregor, an American businessman and author who has lived in China for years, told me. “I just wish we could put LoJacks on the foreign students to be sure they stay.” While, indeed, the United States benefits most when the best foreign students pursue their careers here, we come out ahead even if they depart, since they take American contacts and styles of thought with them. Shirley Tilghman, a research biologist who is now the president of Princeton, made a similar point more circumspectly. “U.S. higher education has essentially been our innovation engine,” she told me. “I still do not see the overall model for higher education anywhere else that is better than the model we have in the United States, even with all its challenges at the moment.” Laura Tyson, an economist who has been dean of the business schools at UC Berkeley and the University of London, said, “It can’t be a coincidence that so many innovative companies are located where they are”—in California, Boston, and other university centers. “There is not another country’s system that does as well—although others are trying aggressively to catch up.”

Americans often fret about the troops of engineers and computer scientists marching out of Chinese universities.

They should calm down. Each fall, Shanghai’s Jiao Tong University produces a ranking of the world’s universities based mainly on scientific-research papers. All such rankings are imprecise, but the pattern is clear. Of the top 20 on the latest list, 17 are American, the exceptions being Cambridge (No. 4), Oxford (No. 10), and the University of Tokyo (No. 20). Of the top 100 in the world, zero are Chinese.

“On paper, China has the world’s largest higher education system, with a total enrollment of 20 million full-time tertiary students,” Peter Yuan Cai, of the Australian National University in Canberra, wrote last fall. “Yet China still lags behind the West in scientific discovery and technological innovation.” The obstacles for Chinese scholars and universities range from grand national strategy—open economy, closed political and media environment—to the operational traditions of Chinese academia. Students spend years cramming details for memorized tests; the ones who succeed then spend years in thrall to entrenched professors. Shirley Tilghman said the modern American model of advanced research still shows the influence of Vannevar Bush, who directed governmental science projects during and after World War II. “It was his very conscious decision to get money into young scientists’ hands as quickly as possible,” she said. This was in contrast to the European “Herr Professor” model, also prevalent in Asia, in which, she said, for young scientists, the “main opportunity for promotion was waiting for their mentor to die.” Young Chinese, Indians, Brazilians, Dutch know they will have opportunities in American labs and start-ups they could not have at home. This will remain America’s advantage, unless we throw it away.

THE MAIN CONCERNS

If we’re worried, perhaps that’s a good sign, since through American history worry has always preceded reform. What I’ve seen as I’ve looked at the rest of the world has generally made me more confident of America’s future, rather than the reverse. What is obvious from outside the country is how exceptional it is in its powers of renewal: America is always in decline, and is always about to bounce back.

Late last year, on the first anniversary of Barack Obama’s election, I was at a lunch where an immigrant billionaire discussed his concerns about the new administration’s economic policy. By the meeting’s ground rules, I am not supposed to identify the speaker—and the wonderful thing about America is that “immigrant billionaire” does not narrow the field down too much. The man thought that deficit spending was out of control, that other world leaders judged the new president as weak and therefore might test him, and that a run on the dollar might begin any day. “But long term, America will be fine,” he said, as if the truth was so self-evident, it didn’t need to be explained.

So what could be the contrary case? It starts with the aspects of relative decline that could actually prove threatening. The main concerns boil down to jobs, debt, military strength, and overall independence. Jobs: Will the rise of other economies mean the decline of opportunities within America, especially for the middle-class jobs that have been the country’s social glue? Debt: Will reliance on borrowed money from abroad further limit the country’s future prosperity, and

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THE LOST EMPIRE

I

And then there was no more Empire all of a sudden.
Its victories were air, its dominions dirt:
Burma, Canada, Egypt, Africa, India, the Sudan.
The map that had seeped its stain on a schoolboy's shirt
like red ink on a blotter, battles, long sieges.
Dhows and feluccas, hill stations, outposts, flags
fluttering down in the dusk, their golden aegis
went out with the sun, the last gleam on a great crag,
with tiger-eyed turbaned Sikhs, pennons of the Raj
to a sobbing bugle. I see it all come about
again, the tasselled cortege, the clomp of the tossing team
with funeral pom-poms, the sergeant major's shout,
the stamp of boots, then the volley; there is no greater theme
than this chasm-deep surrendering of power
the whited eyes and robes of surrendering hordes,
red tunics, and the great names Sind, Turkistan, Cawnpore,
dust-dervishes and the Saharan silence afterwards.

II

A dragonfly's biplane settles and there, on the map,
the archipelago looks as if a continent fell
and scattered into fragments; from Pointe du Cap
to Moule à Chique, *bois-canoë*, *laurier cannelles*,
canoe-wood, spicy laurel, the wind-churned trees
echo the African crests; at night, the stars
are far fishermen's fires, not glittering cities,
Genoa, Milan, London, Madrid, Paris,
but crab-hunters' torches. This small place produces
nothing but beauty, the wind-warped trees, the breakers
on the Dennery cliffs, and the wild light that loosens
a galloping mare on the plain of Vieuxfort make us
merely receiving vessels of each day's grace,
light simplifies us whatever our race or gifts.
I'm content as Kavanagh with his few acres;
for my heart to be torn to shreds like the sea's lace,
to see how its wings catch colour when a gull lifts.

—Derek Walcott

Derek Walcott's 14th collection of poems, White Egrets, will be published next spring. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1992.

its freedom of action too? The military: As wealth flows, so inevitably will armed strength. Would an ultimately weaker United States therefore risk a military showdown or intimidation from a rearmed China? And independence in the broadest sense: Would the world respect a threadbare America? Will repressive values rise with an ascendant China—and liberal values sink with a foundering United States? How much will American leaders have to kowtow?

The full details are beyond us here, but the crucial point is that in principle, the United States itself has the power to correct what is wrong in each case. Take jobs, as a very important for-instance: the loss of middle-class jobs is America's worst economic problem. But that would be so even if China were still as closed as under Mao. According to prevailing economic theory, a country's job structure and income distribution are determined more by its own domestic policies—education, investment, taxes—plus shifts in technology than by anything its competitors do. That's especially true of a large economy like America's. Those policies are ours to change. With differences in detail, something similar is true of America's public and private debt, its maintenance and careful use of military power, and its management of the "soft power" that enlarges its freedom of action.

THE BIGGEST PROBLEM

We could correct all these problems—and that is the heart of the problem. America still has the means to address nearly any of its structural weaknesses. Yes, the problems are intellectually and politically complicated: energy use, medical costs, the right educational and occupational mix to rebuild a robust middle class. But they are no worse than others the nation has faced in more than 200 years, and today no other country comes close to the United States in having the surplus money, technology, and attention to apply to the tasks. (China? Remember, most people there still live on subsistence farms.) First with Iraq and now with Afghanistan, the U.S. has in the past decade committed \$1 trillion to the cause of entirely remaking a society. We know that such an investment could happen here—but we also know that it won't.

That is the American tragedy of the early 21st century: a vital and self-renewing culture that attracts the world's talent, and a governing system that increasingly looks like a joke. One thing I've never heard in my time overseas is "I wish we had a Senate like yours." When Jimmy Carter was running for president in 1976, he said again and again that America needed "a government as good as its people." Knowing Carter's sometimes acid views on human nature, I thought that was actually a sly barb—and that the imperfect American public had generally ended up with the government we deserve. But now

I take his plea at face value. American culture is better than our government. And if we can't fix what's broken, we face a replay of what made the months after the 9/11 attacks so painful: realizing that it was possible to change course and address problems long neglected, and then watching that chance slip away.

The most charitable statement of the problem is that the American government is a victim of its own success. It has survived in more or less recognizable form over more than two centuries—long enough to become mismatched to the real circumstances of the nation. If Henry Adams were whooshed from his Washington of a century ago to our Washington of today, he would find it shockingly changed, except for the institutions of government. Same two political parties, same number of members of the House (since 1913, despite more than a threefold increase in population), essentially same rules of debate in the Senate. Thomas Jefferson's famed wish for "a little rebellion now and then" as a "medicine necessary for the sound health of government" is a nice slogan for organizing rallies, but is not how his country has actually operated.

Every system strives toward durability, but as with human aging, longevity has a cost. The late economist Mancur Olson laid out the consequences of institutional aging in his 1982 book, *The Rise and Decline of Nations*. Year by year, he said, special-interest groups inevitably take bite after tiny bite out of the total national wealth. They do so through tax breaks, special appropriations, what we now call legislative "earmarks," and other favors that are all easier to initiate than to cut off. No single nibble is that dramatic or burdensome, but over the decades they threaten to convert any stable democracy into a big, inefficient, favor-ridden state. In 1994, Jonathan Rauch updated Olson's analysis and called this enfeebling pattern "demosclerosis," in a book of that name. He defined the problem as "government's progressive loss of the ability to adapt," a process "like hardening of the arteries, which builds up stealthily over many years."

We are now 200-plus years past Jefferson's wish for permanent revolution and nearly 30 past Olson's warning, with that much more buildup of systemic plaque—and of structural distortions, too. When the U.S. Senate was created, the most populous state, Virginia, had 10 times as many people as the least populous, Delaware. Giving them the same two votes in the Senate was part of the intricate compromise over regional, economic, and slave-state/free-state interests that went into the Constitution. Now the most populous state, California, has 69 times as many people as the least populous, Wyoming, yet they have the same two votes in the Senate. A similarly inflexible business organization would still have a major Whale Oil Division; a military unit would be mainly fusiliers and cavalry. No one would propose such a system in a constitution written today, but without a revolution, it's unchangeable. Similarly, since it takes 60 votes in the Senate to break a filibuster on controversial legislation, 41 votes is in effect a blocking minority. States that together hold about 12 percent of the U.S. population can provide that

many Senate votes. This converts the Senate from the "saucer" George Washington called it, in which scalding ideas from the more temperamental House might "cool," into a deep freeze and a dead weight.

The Senate's then-famous "Gang of Six," which controlled crucial aspects of last year's proposed health-care legislation, came from states that together held about 3 percent of the total U.S. population; 97 percent of the public lives in states not included in that group. (Just to round this out, more than half of all Americans live in the 10 most populous states—which together account for 20 of the Senate's 100 votes.) "The Senate is full of 'rotten boroughs,'" said James Galbraith, of the University of Texas, referring to the underpopulated constituencies in Parliament before the British reforms of 1832. "We'd be better off with a House of Lords."

The decades-long bipartisan conspiracy to gerrymander both state and federal electoral districts doesn't help. More and more legislative seats are "safe" for one party or the other; fewer and fewer politicians have any reason to appeal to the center or to the other side. In a *National Affairs* article, "Who Killed California?," Troy Senik pointed out that 153 state or federal positions in California were at stake in the 2004 election. Not a single one changed party. This was an early and extreme illustration of a national trend.

On rereading Mancur Olson's book now, I was struck by its relative innocence. Thinking as an economist, Olson re-

A business organization as inflexible as the U.S. Congress would still have a major Whale Oil Division; a military unit would be mainly fusiliers and cavalry.

garded the worst outcome as an America that was poorer than it could otherwise be. But since the time of his book, the gospel of "adapt or die" has spread from West Point to the corporate world (by chance, Olson's *Rise and Decline* was published within weeks of the hugely influential business book *In Search of Excellence*), with the idea that rigid institutions inevitably fail. "I don't think that America's political system is equal to the tasks before us," Dick Lamm, a former three-term governor of Colorado, told me in Denver. "It is interesting that in 1900 there were very few democracies and now there are a lot, but they're nearly all parliamentary democracies. I'm not sure we picked the right form. Ours is great for distributing benefits but has become weak at facing problems. I know the power of American rejuvenation, but if I had to bet, it would be 60–40 that we're in a cycle of decline."

What I have been calling "going to hell" really means a failure to adapt: increasing difficulty in focusing on issues beyond the immediate news cycle, and an increasing gap between the real challenges and opportunities of the time and our attention, resources, and best efforts. Here are symptoms people have mentioned to me:

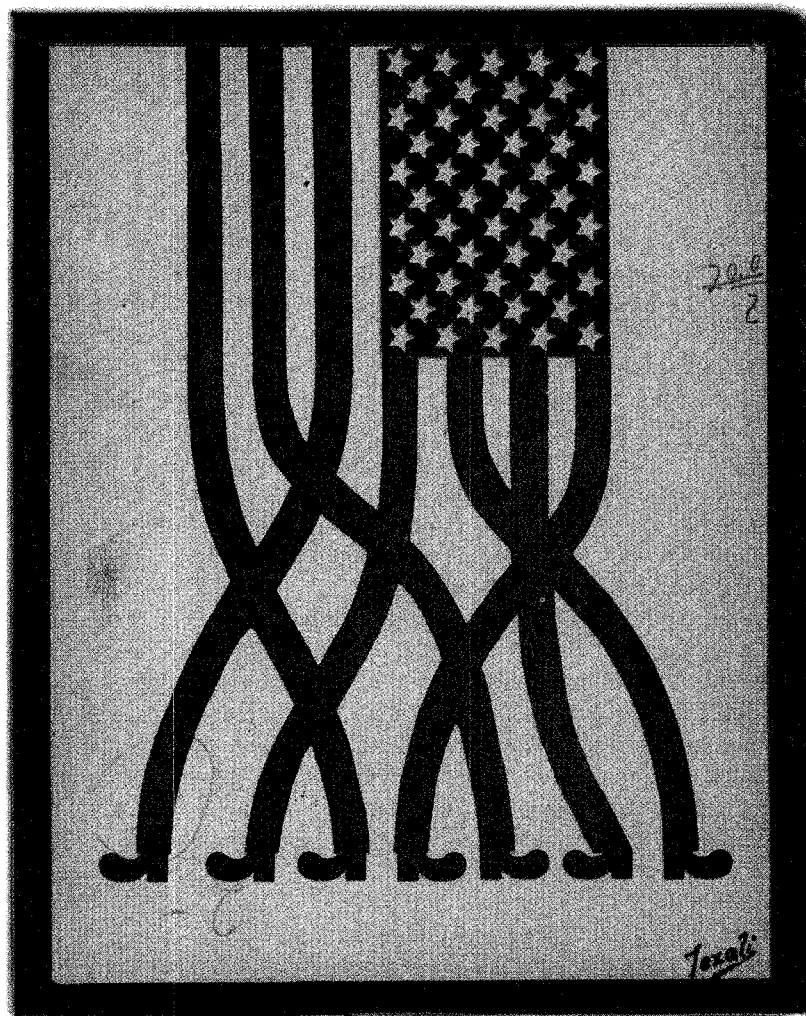
■ In their book on effective government, William Eggers and John O'Leary quote a former deputy mayor of Los Angeles, Michael Keeley, on why the city is out of control. "Think of city government as a big bus," he told them. "The bus is divided into different sections with different constituencies: labor, the city council, the mayor, interest groups, and contractors. Every seat is equipped with a brake, so lots of people can stop the bus anytime. The problem is that this makes the bus undrivable."

For that same book, Eggers and O'Leary surveyed members of the National Academy of Public Administration, a counterpart of the National Academy of Sciences for public managers. Sixty-eight percent of those who responded said that the government was "less likely to successfully execute projects than at any time in the past."

■ Kevin Starr, author of an acclaimed multivolume history of California politics and culture, told me that through the 1960s, the state's public culture was dedicated to the idea that big things could be done. "The water plan, the freeways, the universities—it was all supposed to be the greatest in the history of the human race," he said. "It was envisioned as a higher-ed utopia. Whether you wanted to be a nuclear physicist or a beautician, the state would help get you there." Now, as he and countless others point out, California's system has been engineered to ensure that nothing can be done. Through ballot measures, California's electorate votes itself increasing benefits; through other ballot measures, the public limits taxes to pay for them. Harold Varmus won his Nobel Prize for work done at UC San Francisco and still owns a house in the Bay Area. He says that thanks to California's famous Proposition 13, which has limited property taxes over the past 30 years, his annual taxes in California are about \$600—one-twentieth of what they are for a similar property in New York.

■ The American Society of Civil Engineers prepares a "report card" on the state of America's infrastructure—roads, bridges, dams, etc. In the latest version, the overall "GPA" for the United States was D, and the cost of bringing all systems up to adequacy was estimated at \$2.2 trillion over the next five years, or twice as much as is now budgeted by all levels of government. In 1988, the comparable study gave an overall grade of C, with many items getting B's. Now, the very highest grade was for solid-waste systems, at C+, or "mediocre." Roads, dams, hazardous-waste systems, school buildings, and public drinking water all received a

GALLERY Confusion by Gary Taxali



D or D-. The average dam in the United States is 50 years old. "More than 26%, or one in four, of the nation's bridges are either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete," according to the latest report. Improving existing bridges would cost about \$17 billion per year, or about twice as much as currently budgeted. Worn-out water systems leak away 20 gallons of fresh water per day for every American; replacing systems that are nearing the end of their useful life would cost \$11 billion more annually than all levels of government now plan to spend. "Engineers don't usually put things dramatically, but the alarm about infrastructure is real," Stephen Flynn, of the Center for National Policy, told me. "Our forebears invested billions in these systems when they were relatively much poorer than we are. We won't even pay to maintain them for our own use, let alone have anything to pass to our grandchildren."

■ Robert Atkinson, the director of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, in Washington, has written that several times per century, a "transformational wave" of new technologies ripples through the economy and creates new opportunities and wealth. In the past, these have

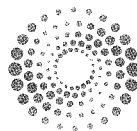


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KNOWLEDGE TO ACT

included mass-production systems, modern chemicals, aviation, and so on. Today the economically important technologies include genomic knowledge, information technologies like the Internet, and the geospatial information, from the GPS network, that is built into everything from dashboard navigators to the climate-change-monitoring systems that measure the size of glaciers or extent of forests. Private companies now create the jobs and wealth in each field, but public funds paid for the original scientific breakthroughs and provided early markets.

It couldn't have been otherwise, Atkinson says. The scale of investment was too vast. The uncertainty of payoff was too great. The risk that profits and benefits would go to competitors who hadn't made the initial investment was too high. The difference between promising and dead-end technologies was too hard to predict—especially decades ago, when work in all these fields began. So each started as a public program: the Internet by the Pentagon, the Human Genome Project by the National Institutes of Health, and the GPS network by the Air Force, which still operates it. The government could not have created Google, but Google could not have existed without government efforts to establish the Internet long before the company's founders were born. This pattern—public investment and standard-setting, followed by private industrial growth—has been consistent through the years, Atkinson said, which is what worries him now. “Our companies and entrepreneurs are matchless in their power to adapt,” he said. “We lead in many categories the private economy can handle by itself. But where you need any public-private coordination, we've become handicapped. I worry that our companies can adapt, but our *system* can't.”

- Scientists I spoke with said that as more and more research money is assigned by favoritism and earmark, it becomes harder for scientists to pursue the most-promising research opportunities. “The amount of earmarking that has percolated into the scientific establishment is disturbing,” Shirley Tilghman, of Princeton, told me, referring to congressional appropriations that single out particular scientists or projects for support rather than letting research organizations distribute the money. “Science is not a democracy. It is a meritocracy. The old cliché that 90 percent of the progress comes from 10 percent of the people is true. You want a system that acknowledges that the first priority is to get resources into the hands of the very best scientists, who are going to do the vast majority of the work that will move us ahead.” That was still easier in America than in most other places, she said, but harder than it used to be.
- In 1972, Congress created an Office of Technology Assessment as a source of nonpartisan expertise on scientific and technical questions, ranging from the utility of early anti-AIDS treatments to the practicality of alternative fuels for cars. The model was hailed and imitated internationally; here, it helped inspire the creation of the Congressional Budget Office two years later. The CBO remains, but in 1995 Newt Gingrich, in one of his early acts as speaker of the House, led a movement to abolish the OTA, as a symbolic

strike against government waste. Its annual budget at the time was \$22 million—less than a dime per U.S. citizen, or 20 minutes' worth of financial-bailout spending early last year. “We are willfully making ourselves stupid,” Ralph Nader said about the absent OTA. He has urged the current Democratic congressional majority to reinstate it. But, he says, “they are so afraid of attacks for supporting ‘big government,’ they won't dare.”

Nader, who at age 75 is as intense and animated as ever, concludes his modern jeremiads with a “yes we can!” appeal for the power of reform. (“I never like the word ‘hope,’ though,” he says. “It's usually ‘I hope you can,’ not ‘I hope we can.’”) But he sounded pretty discouraged when ticking off the problems our system couldn't face. “When was the last time we faced up to a major national problem?” he asked. “Immigration. Corporate crime. The war on drugs, which is a madness beyond boundaries.” The list went on, and of course included the rigidity of the two-party system and “the collapse of Congress” in terms of upholding its authority rather than abdicating its power to the White House. “We would do well to focus on the issue of public paralysis.”

- From a different political starting point than Nader's, Andrew Bacevich reached a similar conclusion. Bacevich, a West Point graduate and career Army officer who now teaches at Boston University, began by criticizing today's popular military doctrine of counterinsurgency, or COIN. With its emphasis on better ways of fighting in Afghanistan or Iraq, he said, it represented a “triumph of tactics over strategy”—that is, better ways of doing a job that perhaps should not be done. “This is a phenomenon that goes beyond the military sphere to the political and economic sphere,” he said. “I think it would be easy for common-sense Americans to draw up a list of big things that would seem to demand concerted effort. Deficits are too big. Health costs are unacceptable. Oil. And yet we have a political system that seems to be constantly consumed with trivial things. We cannot seriously grapple with the big issues. Tactics consume strategy.” Rick Perlstein, whose *Nixonland* and *Before the Storm* are critical histories of the modern conservative movement, said the most worrisome symptom was the relative shortage of a jeremiad theme under Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and now Obama. This he attributed to Ronald Reagan, “who managed to equate criticism with anti-Americanism, and render unintelligible bad news about America.” In the '60s and '70s, Perlstein said, “it was jeremiad city! The best-seller list was full of doom-and-gloom books.” In the long rhythms of American jeremiad, he said, that was a sign of political health, despite the excesses of those times. By contrast, the public mood now is “perilously blithe.”

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

I started out this process uncertain; I ended up convinced. America the society is in fine shape! America the polity most certainly is not. Over the past half century, both parties have helped cause this predicament—Democrats by unintentionally giving governmental efforts a bad name in the 1960s and '70s, Republicans by deliberately doing so from the Reagan

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era onward. At the moment, Republicans are objectively the more nihilistic, equating public anger with the sentiment that “their” America has been taken away and defining both political and substantive success as stopping the administration’s plans. As a partisan tactic, this could make sense; for the country, it’s one more sign of dysfunction, and of the near-impossibility of addressing problems that require truly public efforts to solve. Part of the mind-set of pre-Communist China was the rage and frustration of a great people let down by feckless rulers. Whatever is wrong with today’s Communist leadership, it is widely seen as pulling the country nearer to its full potential rather than pushing it away. America is not going to have a Communist revolution nor endure “100 Years of Humiliation,” as Imperial China did. But we could use more anger about the fact that the gap between our potential and our reality is opening up, not closing.

What are the choices? Logically they come down to these, starting with the most fanciful:

We could hope for an enlightened military coup, or some other *deus ex machina* by the right kind of tyrants. (In his 700-page new “meliorist” novel, *Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us*, Ralph Nader proposes a kind of plutocrats’ coup, in which Warren Buffett, Bill Gates Sr., Ted Turner, et al. collaborate to create a more egalitarian America.) The periodic longing for a “man on horseback” is a reflection of disappointment with what normal politics can bring. George Washington and Dwight Eisenhower were the right men on horseback. With no disrespect to David Petraeus, their like is not in sight. In 1992, an Air Force lieutenant colonel wrote an essay for the National War College called “The Origins of the American Military Coup of 2012,” which began with the perceived failure of civilian politics to address the nation’s problems. The author, Charles Dunlap, who is now a two-star general, meant this as a cautionary tale. His paper began with this quote from John Adams: “Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.” Tempting as the thought is when watching the Senate on C-SPAN, we can’t really hope for a coup.

We could hope to change the basic nature of our democracy, so it fits the times as our other institutions do. But this is about as likely as an enlightened coup. For a few hours on Election Day 2004, it seemed that America had a chance to correct the anachronism of its Electoral College. When exit polls showed John Kerry ahead in Ohio, there was a chance that for the second election in a row, a candidate might lose the popular vote but still become president. (A swing of 60,000 votes in Ohio would have put George W. Bush in Al Gore’s position from four years earlier, as the popular-vote winner who had to go home.) With each party burned, in sequence, we might have agreed on a reform. That chance has passed, and there is no chance for constitutional amendments to make the Senate more representative, since the same small states that would lose power can block any change.

In principle, the United States could call for a new constitutional convention, to reconsider all the rules. That would be my cue to move back to China for good—pollution, Great

Firewall, and all. As a simple thought exercise, imagine the fights over evolution, an “official” language, and countless other “social” questions. “I am perpetually disappointed by our structural resistance to change,” Gary Hart told me, “but can you imagine what would be put into a drafting session for a constitution today?” Kevin Starr said, “You would need a coherent political culture for such a session to occur”—and the lack of such coherence is exactly the problem—“otherwise it would turn into a food fight from *Animal House*.”

A parliamentary system? This too would improve C-SPAN viewing. But not having started there, we cannot get there.

A viable third party? Attractive in theory. But 150 years of failed attempts by formidable campaigners, ranging from Robert LaFollette to Ross Perot, suggest how unlikely this is too.

We might hope for another *Sputnik* moment—to be precise, an event frightening enough to stimulate national action without posing a real threat. That kind of “hope” hardly constitutes a plan. In 2001, America endured an event that should have been this era’s *Sputnik*; but it wasn’t. It doesn’t help now to rue the lost opportunity, but there is no hiding the fact that it was an enormous loss. What could have been a moment to set our foreign policy and our domestic economy on a path for another 50 years of growth—as Eisenhower helped set a 50-year path with his response to *Sputnik*—instead created problems that will probably take another 50 years to correct.

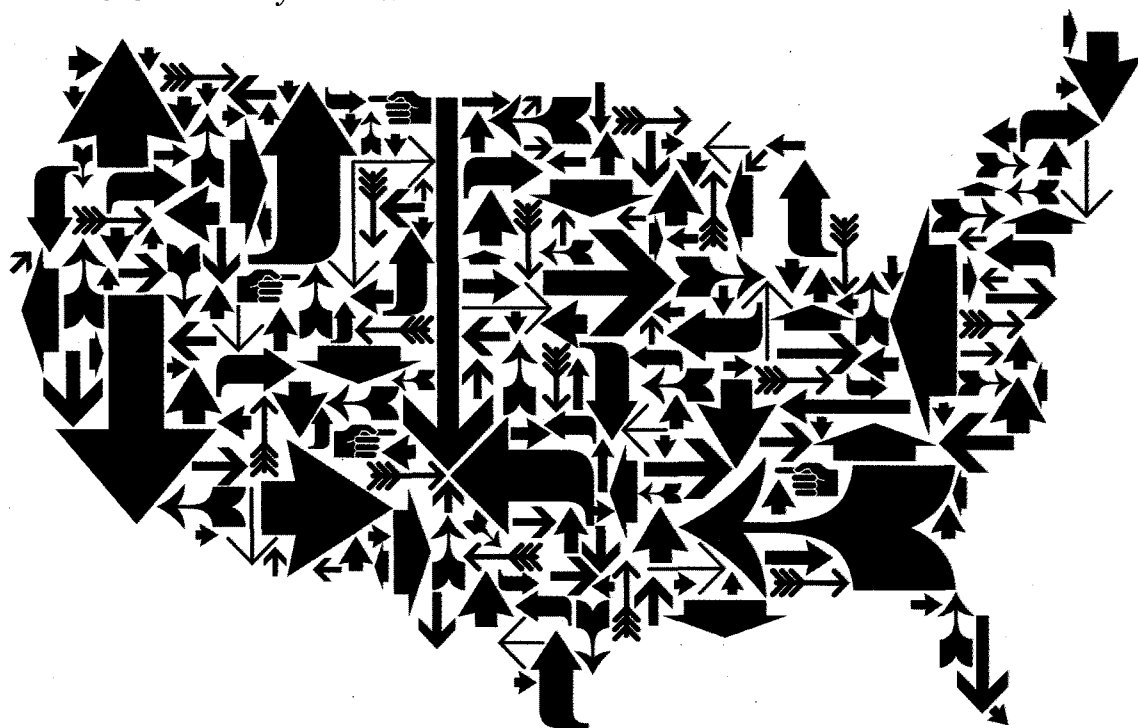
That’s yesterday. For tomorrow, we really have only two choices. Doing more, or doing less. Trying to work with our flawed governmental system despite its uncorrectable flaws, or trying to contain the damage that system does to the rest of our society. Muddling through, or starving the beast.

Readers may have guessed that I am not going for the second option: giving up on public efforts and cauterizing our gangrenous government so that the rest of society can survive. But the reason might be unexpected. I have seen enough of the world outside America to be sure that *eventually* a collapsing public life brings the private sector down with it. If we want to maintain the virtues of private America, we must at least try on the public front too. Rio, Manila, and Mexico City during their respective crime booms; Shanghai in the 1920s and Moscow in the 1990s; Jakarta through the decades; the imagined Los Angeles of *Blade Runner*—these are all venues in which commerce and opportunity abounded. But the

lack of corresponding public virtues—rule of law, expectation of physical safety, infrastructure that people can enjoy or depend on without owning it themselves—made those societies more hellish than they needed to be. When outsiders marvel at today’s China, it is for the combination of private and public advances the country has made. It has private factories *and* public roads; private office buildings *and* public schools. Of course this is not

some exotic Communist combination. The conjunction of private and public abundance typified America throughout its 20th-century rise. We had the big factories and the broad sidewalks, the stately mansions and the public parks. The private economy was stronger because of the public bulwarks provided by Social Security and Medicare. California is giving the first taste of how the public-private divorce will look—and

From James Fallows in next month's issue: more on the shift of power between America and China, including the military implications



its historian, Kevin Starr, says the private economy will soon suffer if the government is not repaired. "Through the country's history, government has had to function correctly for the private sector to flourish," he said. "John Quincy Adams built the lighthouses and the highways. That's not 'socialist' but 'Whiggish.' Now we need ports and highways and an educated populace." In a nearly \$1 trillion stimulus package, it should have been possible to build all those things, in a contemporary, environmentally aware counterpart to the interstate-highway plan. But it didn't happen; we've spent the money, incurred the debt, and done very little to repair what most needs fixing.

Our government is old and broken and dysfunctional, and may even be beyond repair. But Starr is right. Our only sane choice is to muddle through. As human beings, we ultimately become old and broken and dysfunctional—but in the meantime it makes a difference if we try. Our American republic may prove to be doomed, but it will make a difference if we improvise and strive to make the best of the path through our time—and our children's, and their grandchildren's—rather than succumb.

"I often think about how we would make decisions if we knew we would wake up the next day and it would be 75 years later," Cullen Murphy, author of *Are We Rome?*, told me. "It would make a huge difference if we could train ourselves to make decisions that way." It would. Of course, our system can't be engineered toward that perspective. Politicians will inevitably look not 75 years into the future but one election cycle ahead, or perhaps only one news cycle. Corporations live by the quarter; cable-news outlets by the minute. But we can at least introduce this concept into public discussion and consider our issues and choices that way.

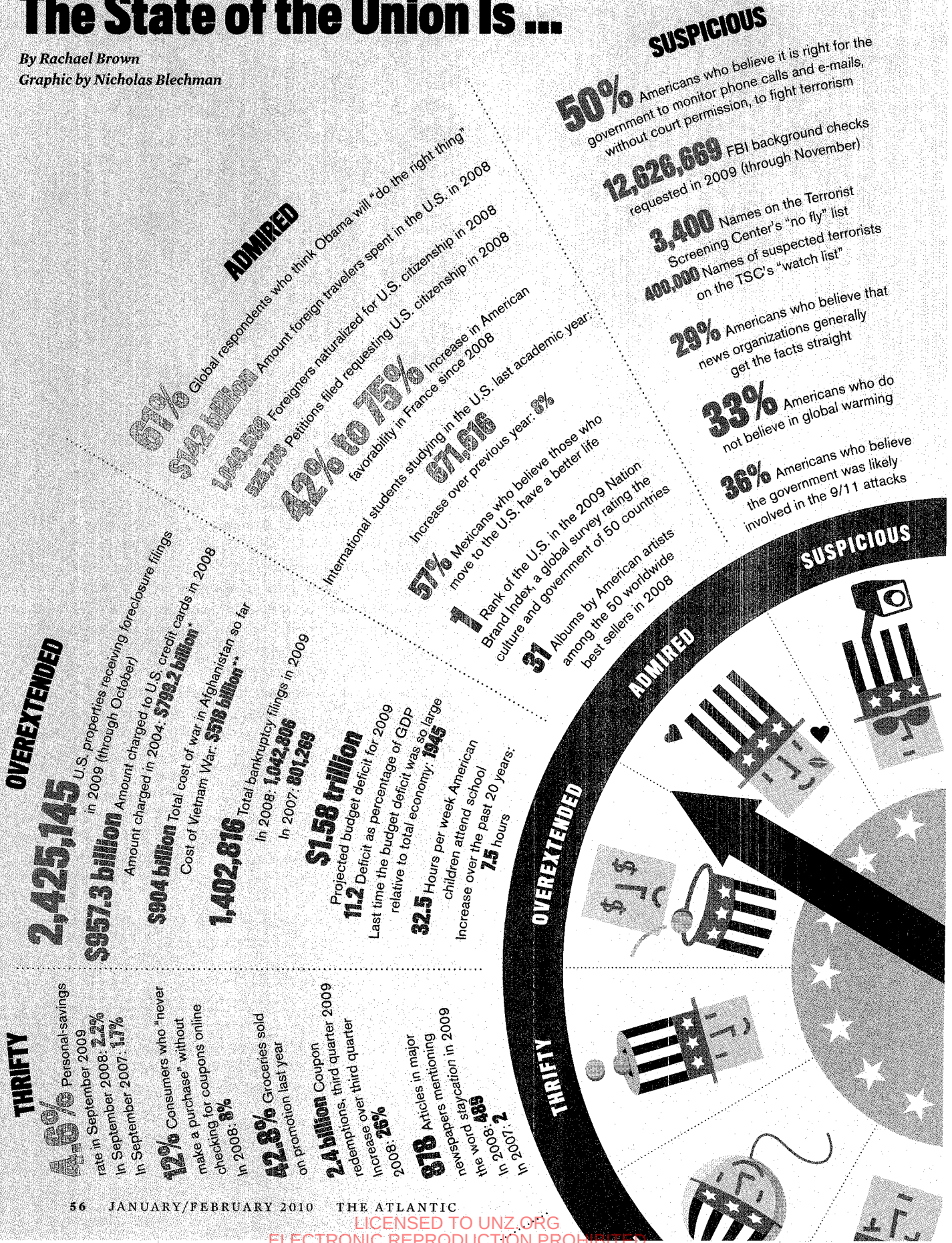
What difference would it make? We could start by being very clear about our strengths, as revealed not simply by comparison with others but also through the pattern of our own rise. The mutually supportive combination of public and private development; the excellence of the universities; the unmatched ability to attract and absorb the world's talent—these are assets we can work to preserve. We could reflect on how much more attainable our goals are when the world works with us—economically, diplomatically—rather than against us. We could not compel international obedience even if we tried, but everything we care about becomes easier if the American model attracts rather than repels. And a longer-term perspective would mean doing all we can to address the "75-year threats"—the issues for which we'll be thanked or blamed two or three generations from now. Rebuilding the infrastructure, so that it's an asset rather than a drag. Reinvesting in research, for the industries our grandchildren will found. Dealing with environmental challenges that will make all the difference in whether the world looks like hell.

America has been strong because, despite its flawed system, people built toward the future in the 1840s, and the 1930s, and the 1950s. During just the time when Frederick Law Olmsted designed Central Park, when Theodore Roosevelt set aside land for the National Parks, when Dwight Eisenhower created the Pentagon research agency that ultimately gave rise to the Internet, the American system seemed broken too. They worked within its flaws and limits, which made all the difference. That is the bravest and best choice for us now. ■

James Fallows is an Atlantic national correspondent; his blog is at jamesfallows.theatlantic.com.

The State of the Union Is ...

By Rachael Brown
Graphic by Nicholas Blechman



IN NUMBERS

* 2004 dollars
** 2008 dollars
† Estimated

For more statistical categories
and a list of sources, please see
www.theatlantic.com/2010map.

TWITCHY

6.5 Hours a day Americans ages 8 to 18 spend using electronic media
0.5 Hours of media exposure packed into that time thanks to "media multitasking"

50% E-mail users who check e-mail while driving
26 Electronic devices for communication and media in the average home

11 Minutes the average office worker works without interruption
About 25 Minutes it takes to resume an interrupted project

6,783 Methamphetamine seizures by the DEA in 2008

42,000 Total wireless applications now in existence

4 billion Cans of Red Bull sold in 2008
Increase from 2007: **13.2%**

FRAGMENTING

Number of religious denominations in America: **at least 146**
Top show on television in 2008, and percentage of homes watching it:
American Idol, 14.4%

In 1952: **I Love Lucy, 67.3%**
6.5 million Americans living abroad†
States that have active secessionist movements:
at least 13

33% Drop in family dinners over the past 25 years
45% Drop in how often people invite friends to their homes over the past 25 years
72% Americans who are participating less in group and civic activities

New Oxford American Dictionary
Word of the Year, 2009:
Unfriend

CLEAN

50% Adults who wash their hands more than 10 times a day
68% Drop in carbon-monoxide air concentration since 1990
18% Drop in lead air concentration since 1990
14,710 Obscenity complaints compiled by ObscenityComplaints.org since 2002

35% Increase in TV and radio indecency and obscenity complaints to the FCC from 2007 to 2008
3,736 Book-ban requests received by American libraries from 2001 to 2008

14 Minutes an American woman's average shower lasts
12 Minutes an American man's average shower lasts

FILTHY

250 million Tons of trash generated by Americans in 2008
4.5 Pounds of solid waste generated per American each day in 2008
In 1980: **3.66**

54.2% Solid waste that is not recycled or burned for energy
175.4 million Americans who live in counties with unhealthy ozone levels

39 Minutes until another porn video is made
\$380 Amount spent on porn each second
89 Percentage of porn Web sites produced in the U.S.

FOR YEARS, THE SECRETS to great teaching have seemed more like alchemy than science, a mix of motivational mumbo jumbo and misty-eyed tales of inspiration and dedication. But for more than a decade, one organization has been tracking hundreds of thousands of kids, and looking at why some teachers can move them three grade levels ahead in a year and others can't. Now, as the Obama administration offers states more than \$4 billion to identify and cultivate effective teachers, Teach for America is ready to release its data.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT TEACHER?

By Amanda Ripley

ON AUGUST 25, 2008, two little boys walked into public elementary schools in Southeast Washington, D.C. Both boys were African American fifth-graders. The previous spring, both had tested below grade level in math.

One walked into Kimball Elementary School and climbed the stairs to Mr. William Taylor's math classroom, a tidy, powder-blue space in which neither the clocks nor most of the electrical outlets worked.

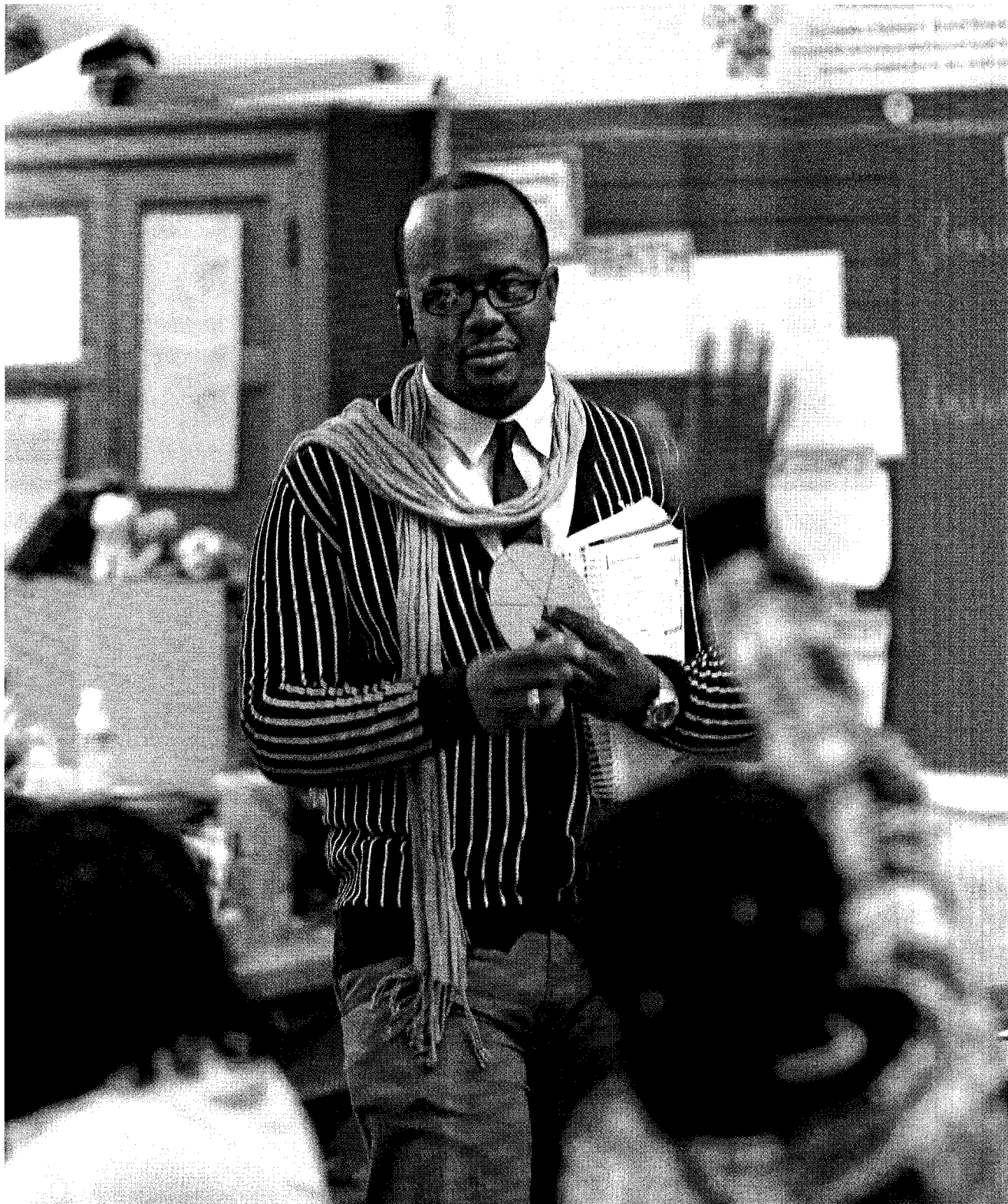
The other walked into a very similar classroom a mile away at Plummer Elementary School. In both schools, more than 80 percent of the children received free or reduced-price lunches. At night, all the children went home to the same urban ecosystem, a ZIP code in which almost a quarter of the families lived below the poverty line and a police district in which somebody was murdered every week or so.

At the end of the school year, both little boys took the same standardized test given at all D.C. public schools—not a perfect test of their learning, to be sure, but a relatively objective one (and, it's worth noting, not a very hard one).

After a year in Mr. Taylor's class, the first little boy's scores went up—way up. He had started below grade level and finished above. On average, his classmates' scores rose about 13 points—which is almost 10 points more than fifth-graders with similar incoming test scores achieved in other low-income D.C. schools that year. On that first day of school, only 40 percent of Mr. Taylor's students were doing math at grade level. By the end of the year, 90 percent were at or above grade level.

As for the other boy? Well, he ended the year the same way he'd started it—below grade level. In fact, only a quarter of the fifth-graders at Plummer finished

VERONIKA LUKASOVA



the year at grade level in math—despite having started off at about the same level as Mr. Taylor's class down the road.

This tale of two boys, and of the millions of kids just like them, embodies the most stunning finding to come out of education research in the past decade: more than any other variable in education—more than schools or curriculum—teachers matter. Put concretely, if Mr. Taylor's student continued to learn at the same level for a few more years, his test scores would be no different from those of his more affluent peers in Northwest D.C. And if these two boys were to keep their respective teachers for three years, their lives would likely diverge forever. By high school, the compounded effects of the strong teacher—or the weak one—would become too great.

Parents have always worried about where to send their children to school; but the school, statistically speaking, does not matter as much as which adult stands in front of their children. Teacher quality tends to vary more *within* schools—even supposedly good schools—than among schools.

But we have never identified excellent teachers in any reliable, objective way. Instead, we tend to ascribe their gifts to some mystical quality that we can recognize and revere—but not replicate. The great teacher serves as a hero but never, ironically, as a lesson.

At last, though, the research about teachers' impact has become too overwhelming to ignore. Over the past year, President Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan, have started talking quite a lot about great teaching. They have shifted the conversation from school accountability—the rather worn theme of No Child Left Behind, President George W. Bush's landmark educational reform—to teacher accountability. And they have done it using one very effective conversational gambit: billions of dollars.

Thanks to the stimulus bonanza, Duncan has lucked into a budget that is more than double what a normal education secretary gets to spend. As a result, he has been able to dedicate \$4.3 billion to a program he calls Race to the Top. To be fair, that's still just a tiny fraction of the roughly \$100 billion in his budget (much of which the government direct-deposits into the bank accounts of schools, whether they deserve the money or not). But especially in a year when states are projecting \$16 billion in school-budget shortfalls, \$4.3 billion is real money. "This is the big bang of teacher-effectiveness reform," says Timothy Daly, president of the New Teacher Project, a nonprofit that helps schools recruit good teachers. "It's huge."

Despite the perky name, Race to the Top is a marathon—and a potentially grueling one; to win, states must take a series of steps that are considered radical in the see-no-evil world of education, where teachers unions have long fought efforts to measure teacher performance based on student test scores and link the data to teacher pay. States must try to identify great teachers, figure out how they got that way, and then create more of them. "This is the wave of the future. This is where we have to go—to look at what's working and what's not," Duncan told me. "It sounds like common sense, but it's revolutionary."

Based on his students' test scores, Mr. Taylor ranks among the top 5 percent of all D.C. math teachers. He's entertaining,

but he's not a born performer. He's well prepared, but he's been a teacher for only three years. He cares about his kids, but so do a lot of his underperforming peers. What's he doing differently?

One outfit in America has been systematically pursuing this mystery for more than a decade—tracking hundreds of thousands of kids, and analyzing why some teachers can move those kids three grade levels ahead in one year and others can't. That organization, interestingly, is not a school district.

Teach for America, a nonprofit that recruits college graduates to spend two years teaching in low-income schools, began outside the educational establishment and has largely remained there. For years, it has been whittling away at its own assumptions, testing its hypotheses, and refining its hiring and training. Over time, it has built an unusual laboratory: almost half a million American children are being taught by Teach for America teachers this year, and the organization tracks test-score data, linked to each teacher, for 85 percent to 90 percent of those kids. Almost all of those students are poor and African American or Latino. And Teach for America keeps an unusual amount of data about its 7,300 teachers—a pool almost twice the size of the D.C. system's teacher corps.

Until now, Teach for America has kept its investigation largely to itself. But for this story, the organization allowed me access to 20 years of experimentation, studded by trial and error. The results are specific and surprising. Things that you might think would help a new teacher achieve success in a poor school—like prior experience working in a low-income neighborhood—don't seem to matter. Other things that may sound trifling—like a teacher's extracurricular accomplishments in college—tend to predict greatness.

STEVEN FARR IS a tall man with a deep, quiet voice. He is Teach for America's in-house professor, so to speak. His job is to find and study excellent teachers, and train others to get similar results. He takes his work very seriously, mostly because he has seen what the status quo looks like up close.

Farr grew up in a family of teachers in central Texas. When he graduated from the University of Texas, in 1993, he had a philosophy degree and an acceptance letter to Yale Law School, neither of which felt quite right. So he deferred law school and joined a new, floundering outfit, Teach for America.

After a little more than a month of somewhat uneven training, Farr walked into Donna High School in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas—a place he'd never been. Many of the three dozen kids in his classroom were the children of migrant workers; they would disappear for weeks at a time as their families followed the harvests.

Talking to Farr about those two years feels a little like talking to a war veteran. You and he both know that you can never understand what it was like, and the clichés come marching in. "It was the hardest, proudest, all of that," he says, his voice drifting away. Then: "I was not the teacher I want our teachers to be."

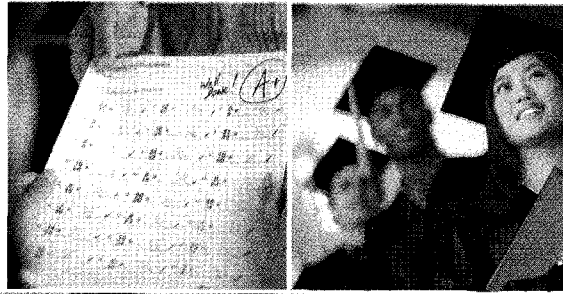
Farr lived with three other Teach for America teachers, in a house that had been confiscated by U.S. Marshals in a drug

SPECIAL PROMOTION

"Hopeful and engaged kids are successful kids. Hopeful and engaged kids are the product of hopeful and engaged teachers. And that's all a product of a hopeful and engaged community."

SHANE LOPEZ

Senior Scientist in Residence, Gallup Organization



Karen Pittman, President & CEO, Forum for Youth Investment



Sherrie Brach, President & CEO, United Way of Greater Richmond & Petersburg



EDUCATING FOR THE FUTURE

Quality education is the bedrock of our children's success—and of our country's continued progress. Yet recent studies have shown that American students are lagging their international peers in important measures of performance and success. Individual schools and districts throughout our country have developed innovative programs that are changing the odds for students. The challenge now is for educators and other leaders to connect across traditional boundaries, and transform these pockets of excellence into excellent educational systems.

That's one reason Altria helped bring the Education Panel Series to our hometown of Richmond, Virginia. This three-part conference followed a simple idea: get teachers, parents, community leaders, and national education experts into one room to examine education solutions that work. Almost universally, the panelists agreed that it will take large-scale efforts and forceful advocacy to truly change the direction of our national and local educational outcomes. This was a first step in our community; we hope it inspires similar steps in yours.

To learn more about the Richmond Education Series and the panelists who spoke, visit www.theatlantic.com/educationseries/.

"As long as people in different youth-serving segments say, 'This is my job, and that's your job,' then we'll continue to hear: 'Who's accountable?' ... Let's make up a new accountability structure. Let's just get over it and make up something that brings people to the table."

KAREN PITTMAN

President & CEO, Forum for Youth Investment

"[One idea to take away from this conversation is that] if there is a school in this city or district that you would not send your child to, [then] that's where you need to go to work."

BOB WISE

President, Alliance for Excellent Education



Altria

raid. He taught English and English as a Second Language. Texas required that students pass a standardized test before they graduate, and as test day approached, Farr felt a mixture of anxiety and resentment.

About a month afterward, he got the news: 76 percent of his students had passed; 24 percent were told they didn't yet have the skills to graduate. Even though many were only sophomores, some of them dropped out as a result. The principal congratulated him on his scores, but Farr cried into his pillow that night. "Some of those kids did not pass because I was not as effective as I needed to be."

After his two years were up, Farr went to law school, as planned. He came back to Teach for America in 2001—this time in charge of training and support. By then, the organization's founder, Wendy Kopp, had begun to notice something puzzling when she visited classrooms: many Teach for America teachers were doing good work. But a small number were getting phenomenal results—and it was not clear why.

Farr was tasked with finding out. Starting in 2002, Teach for America began using student test-score progress data to put teachers into one of three categories: those who move their students one and a half or more years ahead in one year; those who achieve one to one and a half years of growth; and those who yield less than one year of gains. In the beginning, reliable data was hard to come by, and many teachers could not be put into any category. Moreover, the data could never capture the entire story of a teacher's impact, Farr

acknowledges. But in desperately failing schools, where most kids lack basic skills, the only way to bushwhack a path out of the darkness is with a good, solid measuring stick.

As Teach for America began to identify exceptional teachers using this data, Farr began to watch them. He observed their classes, read their lesson plans, and talked to them about their teaching methods and beliefs. He and his colleagues surveyed Teach for America teachers at least four times a year to find out what they were doing and what kinds of training had helped them the most.

Right away, certain patterns emerged. First, great teachers tended to set big goals for their students. They were also perpetually looking for ways to improve their effectiveness. For example, when Farr called up teachers who were making remarkable gains and asked to visit their classrooms, he noticed he'd get a similar response from all of them: "They'd say, 'You're welcome to come, but I have to warn you—I am in the middle of just blowing up my classroom structure and changing my reading workshop because I think it's not working as well as it could.' When you hear that over and over, and you don't hear that from other teachers, you start to form a hypothesis." Great teachers, he concluded, constantly re-evaluate what they are doing.

Superstar teachers had four other tendencies in common: they avidly recruited students and their families into the process; they maintained focus, ensuring that everything they did contributed to student learning; they planned exhaustively

BRAIN

I was traversing the maze of my brain: corridors, corners, strange, narrow caverns, dead ends.
Then all at once my being like this in my brain, this sense of *being* my brain became unbearable to me.

I began to wonder in dismay if the conclusion I'd long ago come to that there can be nothing
that might reasonably be postulated as the soul apart from body and mind was entirely valid.

Why, as many I cherish—Herbert, Hopkins, Weil—have believed, shouldn't there be a substance
neither thought nor matter that floats above both, lifts from both as mist at dawn lifts from a lake?

Here was only this cavern registering the hours of my life, and dissipating, misplacing all but so few.
If I could posit a soul, might this be its task: to salvage in a convincing way all that I'd lost?

Would that be what's meant by consolation? And if there were a soul, and its consolations,
would I perceive the mist and lake of other souls, too? Would I love them more than I already do?

And the lake, and the dawn, and the rudderless barque I picture there: would I love all that more, too?
And the mountain behind, scribbled with trees? And the lace of the dark seeping down, seeping down?

—C. K. Williams

*C. K. Williams's new collection of poems, *Wait*, and a critical study, *On Whitman*, will be published this spring. He received the 2003 National Book Award for *The Singing* and the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for *Repair*.*

and purposefully—for the next day or the year ahead—by working backward from the desired outcome; and they worked relentlessly, refusing to surrender to the combined menaces of poverty, bureaucracy, and budgetary shortfalls.

But when Farr took his findings to teachers, they wanted more. “They’d say, ‘Yeah, yeah. Give me the concrete actions. What does this mean for a lesson plan?’” So Farr and his colleagues made lists of specific teacher actions that fell under the high-level principles they had identified. For example, one way that great teachers ensure that kids are learning is to frequently check for understanding: Are the kids—all of the kids—following what you are saying? Asking “Does anyone have any questions?” does not work, and it’s a classic rookie mistake. Students are not always the best judges of their own learning. They might understand a line read aloud from a Shakespeare play, but have no idea what happened in the last act.

“Strong teachers insist that effective teaching is neither mysterious nor magical. It is neither a function of dynamic personality nor dramatic performance,” Farr writes in *Teaching as Leadership*, a book coming out in February from Farr and his colleagues. The model the book lays out, Farr is careful to say, is not the only path to success. But he is convinced it can improve teaching—and already has. In 2007, 24 percent of Teach for America teachers moved their students one and a half or more years ahead, according to the organization’s internal reports. In 2009, that number was up to 44 percent. That data relies largely on school tests, which vary in quality from state to state. When tests aren’t available or sufficiently rigorous, Teach for America helps teachers find or design other reliable diagnostics.

So far, only one independent, random-assignment study of Teach for America’s effectiveness has been conducted. That report, published by Mathematica Policy Research in 2004, looked at the organization’s teachers and found that, in math, their students significantly outperformed those of their more experienced counterparts. (In reading, though, the teachers’ students did the same as other teachers’ students.) Another study is due out in 2012 or 2013.

MR. TAYLOR, the fifth-grade math teacher in Washington, D.C., is not a member of Teach for America. He grew up attending D.C. public schools and then joined the profession the traditional way: he majored in education in college and then was certified. But Mr. Taylor has a lot in common with the teachers Farr has found to be most effective.

On a typical Monday, Mr. Taylor’s kids come to class and begin silently working on the Problem of the Day written on the blackboard. They sit in four clusters of desks. Each group has a team leader, who is selected by Mr. Taylor each month.

Mr. Taylor walks in and says good morning. “Good morning!” they answer in kid unison. He is wearing a scarf, a black-and-white pinstripe cardigan, and small, oval Dolce & Gabbana glasses, and he looks tired. He is taking classes on the weekends to get his master’s in education administration. He has a Bluetooth headset in one ear and an earring in the other.

After a few minutes, Mr. Taylor announces that it’s time for Mental Math. The kids put down their pencils and grab

the orange index cards and markers on their desks. Mr. Taylor begins to walk around the class, reading problems aloud. “How many 5’s are in 45?” The kids have to do the math in their heads. All of them write their answers on their cards and thrust them up in the air. With a quick scan, Mr. Taylor can see if every child has written the right answer. Then he says, “What’s the answer?” And all the kids call out, “Nine!” When they get an answer right, they whisper-shout “Yes!” and pump their fists. If some kids get it wrong, they have not embarrassed themselves by individually raising their hand and announcing their mistake. But Mr. Taylor knows he needs to give them more attention—or, more likely, have their team leader work with them. Children, he has learned, speak to each other in a language they can better understand.

“Now I’m going to trick you,” Mr. Taylor says. “What’s 3 times 120?” The orange cards go down—and back up. “Ooh, ooh, ooh!” says one little girl, unable to contain herself.

WE TEND TO ASCRIBE THE GIFTS OF EXCELLENT TEACHERS TO SOME MYSTICAL QUALITY THAT WE CAN RECOGNIZE AND REVERE—BUT NOT REPLICATE.

“Ooh”? Is that the answer?” Mr. Taylor says, silencing her.

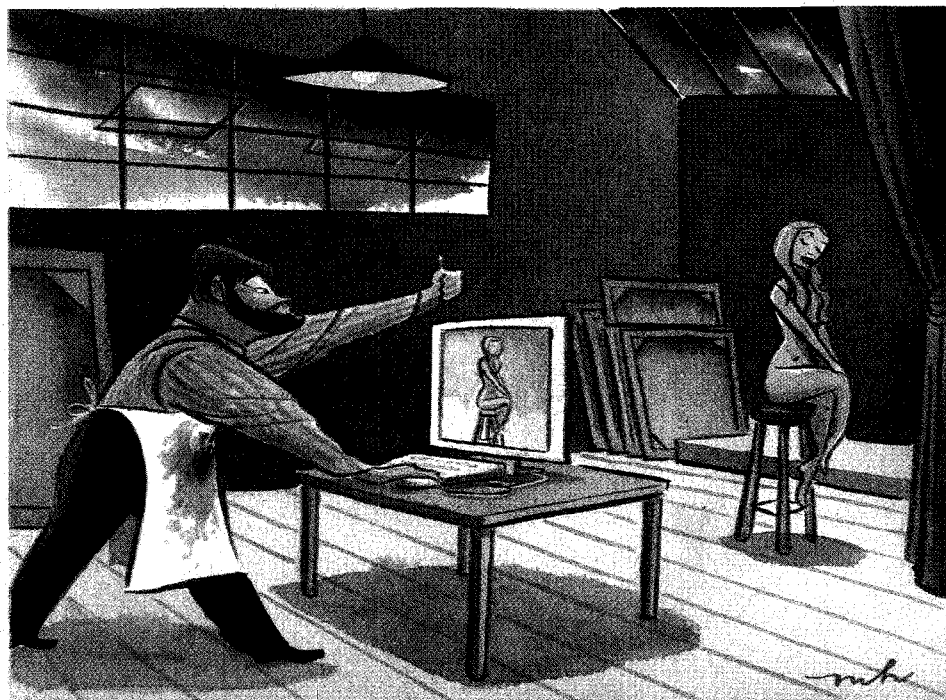
Next, Mr. Taylor goes to the board to teach a new way to do long division. It’s a clever method that takes a little longer but is much easier than most other methods, and I’ve never seen it before. “You want to work smart, not hard,” he tells me later. “If you just show them the traditional method, not everyone understands.” He actually learned the method last year—from one of his students.

Mr. Taylor follows a very basic lesson plan often referred to by educators as “I do, we do, you do.” He does a problem on the board. Then the whole class does another one the same way. Then all the kids do a problem on their own. During the “we” portion of the lesson, Mr. Taylor calls on students to help solve the problem. But he does this using the “equity sticks”—a can of clothespins, each of which has a student’s name on it. That way, he ensures a random sample. The shy ones don’t get lost.

As the kids move into group work, there is a low buzz in the room. I try, but I can’t find a child who isn’t talking about math. One little boy leans across his desk to help another with a problem. “What do you add to 8 to get 16?” he says, and then he waits. “Eight,” the other boy says. “Then,” says the first, “you subtract that and what do you get?”

The activities come in brisk sequence, following a routine the kids know by heart, so no time is lost in transition. In *Teaching as Leadership*, Farr describes seeing such choreography in other high-performance classrooms. “We see routines so strong that they run virtually without any involvement from the teacher. In fact, for many highly effective teachers, the measure of a well-executed routine is that it continues in the teacher’s absence.”

On the front wall, Mr. Taylor has posted different hand signals—if you need to go to the bathroom, you raise a closed



hand. To ask or answer a question, you raise an open hand. "This way, I have the information before I even call on you," Mr. Taylor explains. There is even a signal for when you are having a terrible day and don't feel up to participating: you just put your head down on your desk. I ask Mr. Taylor how often kids exploit that option. "I've never had anybody put their head down," he says, matter-of-factly. "In three years?" I ask. "No."

Next, Mr. Taylor announces it's time for Multiplication Bingo. As Mr. Taylor reads off a problem ("20 divided by 5"), the kids scour their boards, chips in hand, looking for 4's. One girl is literally shaking with excitement. Another has her hands clasped in a prayer position. I find myself wanting to play. You know you're in a good classroom if you have to stop yourself from raising your hand.

Finally, after a dozen problems go by, a small voice from an even smaller boy pronounces, "Bingo!" Kids wail in despair as the tiny boy walks up to collect his prize (a pencil) from Mr. Taylor. "Dang!" one girl says. "Okay, relax," Mr. Taylor says, smiling. "It's just a game." Before they leave, all the kids fill out an "exit slip," which is usually in the form of a problem—one more chance for Mr. Taylor to see how they, and he, are doing.

When I talk to Mr. Taylor after class, I notice that he tends to redirect questions so that they reflect his own performance. When I ask him if his first year on the job was hard, he says, "I found that the kids were not hard. It was explaining the information to them that was hard. You paint this picture in your head about how you will teach this lesson, and you can teach the whole lesson and no one gets it."

Like all the teachers I talked to in Washington, Mr. Taylor laments the lack of parental involvement. "On back-to-school

night, if you have 28 or 30 kids in your class, you're lucky to see six or seven parents," he says. But when I ask him how that affects his teaching, he says, "Actually, it doesn't. I make it my business to call the parents—and not just for bad things." The first week of class, Mr. Taylor calls all his students' parents and gives them his cell-phone number.

Other teachers I interviewed spent most of our time complaining. "With the testing and the responsibility and keeping up with the behavior reports and the data, it has gotten so much harder over the years," said one fourth-grade teacher at Kimball, the same school where Mr. Taylor teaches. "It's more work than it should be. They don't give us the time to be creative."

A 23-year veteran who earns more than \$80,000 a year, this teacher has a warm manner, and her classroom is bright and neat. She paid for the kids' whiteboards, the clock, and the DVD player herself. But she seems to have given up on the kids' prospects in a way that Mr. Taylor has not. "The kids in Northwest [D.C.] go on trips to France, on cruises. They go places and their parents talk to them and take them to the library," she says one fall afternoon between classes. "Our parents on this side don't have the know-how to raise their children. They're not sure what it takes for their child to make it."

When her fourth-grade students entered her class last school year, 66 percent were scoring at or above grade level in reading. After a year in her class, only 44 percent scored at grade level, and none scored above. Her students performed worse than fourth-graders with similar incoming scores in other low-income D.C. schools. For decades, education researchers blamed kids and their home life for their failure to learn. Now, given the data coming out of classrooms like Mr. Taylor's, those arguments are harder to take. Poverty matters enormously. But teachers all over the country are moving poor kids forward anyway, even as the class next door stagnates. "At the end of the day," says Timothy Daly at the New Teacher Project, "it's the *mind-set* that teachers need—a kind of relentless approach to the problem."

ONCE TEACHERS HAVE been in the classroom for a year or two, who is very good—and very bad—becomes much clearer. But teachers are almost never dismissed. Principals almost never give teachers poor performance evaluations—even when they know the teachers are failing.

Ideally, schools would hire better teachers to begin with.

But this is notoriously difficult. How do you screen for a relentless mind-set?

When Teach for America began, applicants were evaluated on 12 criteria (such as persistence and communication skills), chosen based on conversations with educators. Recruits answered open-ended questions like “What is wind?” Starting in 2000, the organization began to retroactively critique its own judgments. What did the best teachers have in common when they applied for the job?

Once a model for outcomes-based hiring was built, it started churning out some humbling results. “I came into this with a bunch of theories,” says Monique Ayotte-Hoeltzel, who was then head of admissions. “I was proven wrong at least as many times as I was validated.”

Based on her own experience teaching in the Mississippi Delta, Ayotte-Hoeltzel was convinced, for example, that teachers with earlier experience working in poor neighborhoods were more effective. Wrong. An analysis of the data found no correlation.

For years, Teach for America also selected for something called “constant learning.” As Farr and others had noticed, great teachers tended to reflect on their performance and adapt accordingly. So people who tend to be self-aware might be a good bet. “It’s a perfectly reasonable hypothesis,” Ayotte-Hoeltzel says.

But in 2003, the admissions staff looked at the data and discovered that reflectiveness did not seem to matter either. Or more accurately, trying to predict reflectiveness in the hiring process did not work.

What *did* predict success, interestingly, was a history of perseverance—not just an attitude, but a track record. In the interview process, Teach for America now asks applicants to talk about overcoming challenges in their lives—and ranks their perseverance based on their answers. Angela Lee Duckworth, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and her colleagues have actually quantified the value of perseverance. In a study published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* in November 2009, they evaluated 390 Teach for America instructors before and after a year of teaching. Those who initially scored high for “grit”—defined as perseverance and a passion for long-term goals, and measured using a short multiple-choice test—were 31 percent more likely than their less gritty peers to spur academic growth in their students. Gritty people, the theory goes, work harder and stay committed to their goals longer. (Grit also predicts retention of cadets at West Point, Duckworth has found.)

But another trait seemed to matter even more. Teachers who scored high in “life satisfaction”—reporting that they were very content with their lives—were 43 percent more likely to perform well in the classroom than their less satisfied colleagues. These teachers “may be more adept at engaging their pupils, and their zest and enthusiasm may spread to their students,” the study suggested.

In general, though, Teach for America’s staffers have discovered that past performance—especially the kind you can measure—is the best predictor of future performance. Recruits who have achieved big, measurable goals in college

tend to do so as teachers. And the two best metrics of previous success tend to be grade-point average and “leadership achievement”—a record of running something and showing tangible results. If you not only led a tutoring program but doubled its size, that’s promising.

Knowledge matters, but not in every case. In studies of high-school math teachers, majoring in the subject seems to predict better results in the classroom. And more generally, people who attended a selective college are more likely to excel as teachers (although graduating from an Ivy League school does not unto itself predict significant gains in a Teach for America classroom). Meanwhile, a master’s degree in education seems to have no impact on classroom effectiveness.

The most valuable educational credentials may be the ones that circle back to squishier traits like perseverance. Last summer, an internal Teach for America analysis found that an applicant’s college GPA alone is not as good a predictor as the GPA in the final two years of college. If an applicant starts out with mediocre grades and improves, in other words, that curve appears to be more revealing than getting straight A’s all along.

Last year, Teach for America churned through 35,000 candidates to choose 4,100 new teachers. Staff members select

AN APPLICANT'S COLLEGE GPA ALONE IS NOT AS GOOD A PREDICTOR OF TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS AS THE GPA IN THE FINAL TWO YEARS OF COLLEGE.

new hires by deferring almost entirely to the model: they enter more than 30 data points about a given candidate (about twice the number of inputs they considered a decade ago), and then the model spits out a hiring recommendation. Every year, the model changes, depending on what the new batch of student data shows.

This year, Teach for America allowed me to sit in on the part of the interview process that it calls the “sample teach,” in which applicants teach a lesson to the other applicants for exactly five minutes. Only about half of the candidates make it to this stage. On this day, the group includes three men and two women, all college seniors or very recent graduates.

One young woman—I’ll call her Abigail—stands up to teach her lesson. She has curly blond hair and wears a navy-blue suit. She tells us she will be teaching a fifth-grade Spanish class. She tapes up a preprepared poster. (Female applicants are more likely to bring props, which is not a bad thing. In fact, women are more likely to be effective in Teach for America, Duckworth found.) Then she writes her objective on the room’s whiteboard: to teach the days of the week. Krzysztof Kosmicki, a Teach for America program director, starts the clock.

To me, Abigail’s objective seems a little dull (especially compared with that of another applicant, who taught “the five fluids that transmit HIV”). She asks the class to repeat each of the days of the week. “I know it’s confusing,” she says.

So she teaches them a song to help keep them straight, and then has the applicants sing it—twice. “If I don’t hear everyone’s voice, we’re going to sing it again until I do.” When she asks what day it is, Kosmicki volunteers the wrong answer. She asks another applicant to help correct him, which he does, and then her time is up.

The last applicant to teach is a young man I’ll call Michael. He has been very quiet, but he becomes much more animated when he starts teaching. His objective is to teach the order of operations in a math problem. “Good morning, class!” he says. When someone gets something right, he says, “Correc-tomundo!” He seems confident. He asks if he can get a volunteer to answer part of the problem on the board, and one of the other applicants steps up. Kosmicki asks him to explain exponents again, which he does. Time’s up.

Later, I talk with Kosmicki about his impressions. He liked Abigail’s sample teach—but not Michael’s. Kosmicki is not very interested in the things I noticed most: charisma, ambitious lesson objectives, extroversion. What matters more, at least according to Teach for America’s research, is less flashy: Were you prepared? Did you achieve your objective in five minutes?

“Abigail’s sample teach was exceptional,” says Kosmicki, who taught for Teach for America in the South Bronx before starting a charter school in Newark, New Jersey. “It was abundantly clear to me that she had practiced.” The students successfully learned the days of the week “somewhere between the third and fourth minute,” Kosmicki says. He was interested in what Abigail was doing, but he had been more focused on the other applicants, acting as her class.

This summer, those who have been accepted will go to a Teach for America training institute. That’s when Steven Farr, the in-house professor, and his colleagues take over. For them, the challenge is not to pick the perfect teacher but to diagnose strengths and weaknesses early and provide intense, customized training to correct them. Farr is more hopeful each year. “When I see not a handful, not dozens, but hundreds of people being successful in a world where most people think success is not possible, I know it can be done,” he told me.

Of course, thanks to its mission and brand, Teach for America has been able to draw from a strong recruiting pool. (During the 2008–09 school year, 11 percent of Ivy League seniors applied.) Large, low-income school districts do not get nearly as many candidates per open position, and most of the candidates they do get aren’t nearly as high-caliber. Plus, the extreme hours that Teach for America teachers put in—for two years—are not sustainable for most people over the long term.

But if school systems hired, trained, and rewarded teachers according to the principles Teach for America has identified, then teachers would not need to work so hard. They would be operating in a system designed in a radically different way—designed, that is, for success.

This year, D.C. public schools have begun using a new evaluation system for all faculty and staff, from teachers to custodians. Each will receive a score, just like the students, at

the end of the year. For teachers whose students take standardized tests, like Mr. Taylor, half their score will be based on how much their students improved. The rest will be based largely on five observation sessions conducted throughout the year by their principal, assistant principal, and a group of master educators. Throughout the year, teachers will receive customized training. At year’s end, teachers who score below a certain threshold could be fired.

The handbook for the new system looks eerily similar to the Teach for America model, which is not a coincidence. The man who designed it, Jason Kamras, is a former Teach for America teacher who taught in a low-income D.C. school for eight years before being chosen by D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee to help fix the schools. Rhee is herself a Teach for America alumna, who went on to run the New Teacher Project.

Washington, D.C., is also applying for Race to the Top money from the Obama administration, along with many states. To qualify, states must first remove any legal barriers to linking student test scores to teachers—something California and Wisconsin are already doing. To win money, states must also begin distinguishing between effective and ineffective teachers—and consider that information when deciding whether to grant tenure, give raises, or fire a teacher or principal (a linkage that the National Education Association, the country’s largest teachers union, has criticized as “inappropriate” federal interference in local

CHARISMA, AMBITIOUS LESSON OBJECTIVES, AND EXTROVERSION MAY MATTER LESS TO GOOD TEACHING THAN JUST BEING WELL PREPARED AND FOCUSED.

prerogatives). And each year, states must publish which of their education and other prep programs produced the most effective (and ineffective) teachers and principals. If state and local school officials, along with teachers unions, step up to the challenge, Race to the Top could begin to rationalize America’s schools.

By the time the Obama administration begins handing out awards this spring, Mr. Taylor will be finishing up another year at Kimball Elementary. On the mornings his students take their standardized tests, he will cook a hot breakfast of sausage, eggs, and toast for them, as he always does. But this tradition may be coming to an end. He’s thinking about quitting in the next few years.

Mr. Taylor wants to become a principal. In just three years as a teacher, he feels that he has already run up against the limits of his classroom. He wants to bring what he has learned to scale. That way, he says, “it won’t just stay with me, bundled in Room 204.” He is, like many great teachers, well aware that he is not one in a million—or at least, that he should not be. ■

Amanda Ripley is the author of The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes—and Why.

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«THE LISTENER»

By Timothy Lavin

EVERY NIGHT, WHEN most of the world has drifted into unconsciousness, some 30 percent of the American population stays awake. They're truckers, insomniacs, night-shift workers, or just people who like to stay up late. They tend to adhere to a different set of norms. For one thing, in an age of digital distraction, they connect with enthusiasm to a decidedly analog device: they listen to the radio for longer periods, with greater attention, and with greater loyalty than do audiences at any other time of the day. They tend to listen alone—alone in bed, alone on a highway, alone in the world—and find that a voice in the darkness offers a bond with a wider community. Perhaps you're one of them. Or perhaps, if you've ever driven across country in the dark, or flipped on the radio because you couldn't sleep, you know the feeling.

You might also have caught a glimpse into one of the odder realms of modern media. Lately, night people listen, in huge numbers, to a syndicated program called *Coast to Coast AM* with George Noory. It's by far the most popular overnight show in the country. And it's probably the most successful program of its kind ever aired. But just what kind of program it is, no one can quite say. Its topical breadth alone defies categorization: aliens, time travel, 9/11 conspiracies, suspicious murders, vampires, mediated telepathy, birds of unusual size. Shadow People seem to show up a lot. Every evening, *Coast to Coast* offers a running commentary on what keeps people awake, in fear or fascination, through what Keats called the "unslumbrous night."

And on such vague apprehensions, George Noory—a man of long radio experience, indeterminate politics, and ominous

generality—is likely the world's foremost authority. His show is more than a curiosity: it has propelled overnight radio from commercial obscurity into radiant profitability, and has helped set a tone that, both thematically and rhetorically, now pervades American media. In the process, it has become perhaps the most complete chronicle of our strange national anxieties ever agglomerated. And these are very anxious times.

FROM AN UNEXCEPTIONAL corporate tower in the San Fernando Valley, Premiere Radio Networks fills the American airwaves with 90 syndicated programs every day. To wander through its hushed offices at night is to find oneself in a monastery of the information age. Everything—floors, ceilings, walls, nameplates, overhead lighting—is white, projecting to the visitor an austere purity of purpose. During the day, the network will spread to the wider world the combative politics of contemporary talk radio, from the likes of Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, and Dr. Laura. Ideology is to these homilists what ale is to the Trappist: a stimulating attractant that may pull unbelievers toward the larger cause of loyal listenership.

But those who keep vigil after 10 p.m. are of a more contemplative sort, and George Noory undertakes his duties more through faith than works. He has faith in his listeners, and his listeners have a surpassing faith in him.

For four hours every night, on holidays and weekends, *Coast to Coast* beams from a small, unmarked studio, down the hall to Premiere's National Operations Center, then out to 525 affiliate stations reaching every major radio market, and into the homes of some 3 million people and counting. The show has no national competition on the nighttime airwaves.

DREW REYNOLDS



Tonight, Noory would be talking to Marla Frees, a psychic who communes with pets, and Larry Dossey, a physician who sidelines as an interpreter of intuition. Before the show, Noory and I sat and talked in the studio. A muted television tuned to Fox News flashed overhead, as it often does, and Noory sat at a cluttered kidney-shaped table, two serious-looking microphones before him. He is 59 and has a round chin, black hair graying slightly on the sides, and sad brown eyes. His left eyebrow rises in a semipermanent arch, lending him an aspect of either surprise or skepticism when he speaks. His voice has a deep, agreeable timbre and a relaxing radioman's cadence that recalls Jean Shepherd more than Sean Hannity.

On this night, he wore jeans, a plain black T-shirt untucked, and a bejeweled silver watch that sparkled in the dim light. He repeated to me the personal mythology he has carefully fashioned since he took over *Coast to Coast* from his predecessor, Art Bell, in 2003.

Noory grew up in Detroit, the oldest of three children, the son of an Egyptian father who worked at Ford Motor Company and a Lebanese American mother. He was raised Roman Catholic, singing in the choir and going to catechism class. As a boy, he listened constantly to Edward R. Murrow and

three children, and quit journalism for an executive position at the giant PR firm Fleishman-Hillard, where, he says, "I really honed my corporate and marketing skills." But he grew restless. He started a restaurant, a video-production company, and various other enterprises, successful and otherwise. "Then, you know, I just sat around for a while trying to regroup at an age of around 46, tried to figure out what I wanted to do with my life."

At about that time, he saw the movie *Talk Radio*—which stars Eric Bogosian as a caustic radio host who gets gunned down outside his studio—and felt that perhaps an on-air position might be his true calling. He found a job doing the overnight shift for an AM station in St. Louis called KTRS. He began calling himself "The Nighthawk" and entertaining an initially small audience with tales of the unexplained. Slowly, his popularity grew, and his reputation spread in the small and fervent brotherhood of paranormal media. Eventually he landed his dream job of subbing for Bell—who had by then become a cult hero—on *Coast to Coast AM*. He took over full-time after Bell retired, in January of 2003.

When Noory discusses his current job, his psyche seems split by the imperatives of show business and journalism. He

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Walter Cronkite, and had a habit of announcing things—like the liftoff of toy rockets—to the neighborhood children.

Noory's paranormal odyssey began, appropriately, in the liminal space between sleeping and waking. One day, when he was 11 or so, home in bed and sick with a fever, he felt himself float to the ceiling and hang there, tethered by some unseen mechanism, looking down on his sleeping body. The moment was brief and scary. But it left within him both a conviction and a compulsion—a feeling that something unseen animates the world, and the impulse to investigate it. The next day, he searched the library and found *The Projection of the Astral Body*, by Hereward Carrington and Sylvan Muldoon, a briefly famous handbook on out-of-body experiences. Not long afterward, his mother gave him Walter Sullivan's *We Are Not Alone*. His fascination with the occult burgeoned. He joined a UFO club and developed a close relationship with his cousin Shafica Karagula, a psychiatrist and the founding mother of New Age medicine.

"My life really began to evolve at that young age," Noory told me.

A few years later, while at the University of Detroit, he filled in as a production assistant at the local ABC television affiliate, getting coffee and cleaning the teletype machines, and eventually parlayed that into a full-time reporting job at a 50,000-watt local radio station. For years after college, he lived the itinerant life of the broadcast journalist, working his way from producer to news executive and from Michigan to Minnesota to Missouri. Finally, he became the news director for KSDK-TV in St. Louis. He won three Emmys, raised

fully inhabits his on-air persona—oracular, persistent, amiable in the face of dark machinations—but offers hints that he remains at heart a newsman of the old school. He likes to mention his days as a city reporter, the big stories he covered, the fact that he was the last journalist to speak to Jimmy Hoffa. Then he'll say things like this: "I believe that there are groups on this planet far above governments—who control governments. I think that there are players on this planet who are so wealthy, and so powerful, that the game for them is control and manipulation. And they make presidents, and they make kings and queens, and they make leaders of nations. Who are they specifically? I'm not going to give the names—I never do on the air. But we all suspect who they may be. And those are the ones that you have to be careful of."

Lately, of course, such a worldview has acquired a new plausibility. To the paranoid mind, the government's heavy-handed response to the financial crisis—the nationalizations, the bailouts, the immoderate stimuli—confirmed a particular understanding of the way power is wielded in the world. And Noory has detected, in his nightly callers, a new seriousness. "This push for more of a world government that so many people laughed at five or six years ago, including me—we aren't laughing anymore," he told me. "Because you begin to see the pieces of a puzzle, and when you put them together you begin to see a picture you really don't like. This incredible need to control and manipulate—I think our program cuts to the heart of that."

Noory seems most alive when entertaining these strange cosmic designs—when he's connecting conspiratorial dots,

endowing the most mundane of everyday events with numinous possibility. But it's almost impossible to tell, at these moments, how much he really believes. He doesn't seem to know himself.

"I think there's a huge shift under way," he said, looking up at the TV. "People are beginning to realize that they can't fully trust government anymore, that they can't fully trust even their neighbors sometimes, sadly enough. So they're reaching out for something they can grasp, and they're doing it now in numbers higher than I've ever witnessed as long as I've been in this business. We're in a very strange time right now."

THE NEXT NIGHT, I joined Noory and one of his producers, Tom Danheiser, for dinner before the show. We met at the studio, then rolled down Ventura Boulevard in Noory's black Lincoln Navigator. We got out at a Greek restaurant, and Noory handed his keys to a valet. Inside, the pair greeted everyone by name and shook hands with the owner, who was clearly thrilled to see them. The bartender asked if they'd seen Elvis today. They found themselves a table near the back, and we talked about the show. Before long, the impulse to tell funny stories about life within the *Coast to Coast* universe—which extends past the studio's orbit and into conferences, TV appearances, and speaking engagements, and is expanding—proved irresistible. And I realized, as I listened, that all the stories were funny in a particular way: it's never clear, in their world, where the demarcation between fantasy and reality is drawn—or, indeed, if such a line can really be said to exist anymore.

We talked about the time a man in traditional Mayan garb interrupted a conference of fringe scholars who believe the ancient Mayans predicted the world would end in 2012. He was wielding a cane, and unloaded a profane tirade on the attendees. "He went ballistic. I mean he had *lost* it," Noory said. "Plus, I didn't know what was in his cane. You never know—people are passionate about these things." They told me about Ed Grimsley, who for years would lurk around paranormal conferences with a suspicious-looking backpack that, he finally revealed, contained the night-vision goggles through which he witnessed a UFO war unfolding, night after night. (Noory says he saw two UFOs, his first and only sighting, with Grimsley not long ago.) And about Dr. Roger Leir, whom the pair watched perform surgery on someone putatively afflicted by an alien implant. "Oh, he definitely cuts people," Danheiser said, laughing, when I expressed my skepticism about the procedure's authenticity. And about the man who approached Noory at a dinner and told him, urgently, that he needed to show him photos of a perpetual-motion machine he had created, only to slap down pictures of common toilet parts. (The man admitted he hadn't quite gotten the machine to work yet.) And, finally, about the time they had a nurse on the show to discuss Morgellons disease, a possibly psychosomatic ailment in which one feels crawling sensations beneath the flesh, and 10,000 listeners e-mailed the poor woman to report that they had it.

"Or thought they had it," Noory said.

"Or thought they had it," Danheiser repeated.

These stories reminded me of the first time I met Noory. He had been the featured speaker at a meeting of paranoid

minds called the X-Conference, held in Gaithersburg, Maryland, a few months back. His presence electrified the crowd, hundreds strong, who greeted him with chants of "George, George, George!" On either side of the podium, huge projection screens showed a close-up of his face.

"All of us are here because we believe. Or want to believe. Or there's something happening in our lives that seems to be drawing us to this," he told the crowd. "We're looking for answers ... And until we can get the right answers—of who we are, and what we are—we're going to be plagued with this inner feeling that you all have."

He paused, and looked around the packed ballroom. "I mean, how many of you have that emptiness inside of you?"

Not a single hand went up.

"They all felt it," he said, when I asked him, at the restaurant, about that moment. "They were afraid."

I asked him if the emptiness he was talking about was one reason his show seemed to be taking off. He leaned back in his chair and looked out the window.

"You know, I don't know," he said. "It just continues to get bigger, and bigger, and bigger. People are interconnected, and they are pulling themselves to a central point where we're all meeting, which happens to be this radio show. But there is something out there that is truly profound. I mean, today they announced that the astronauts had attached a brand-new camera to the Hubble telescope, which they said would allow them to peer back to just 500 million years after the dawn of the universe. Isn't that an incredibly profound statement? Five hundred million years after the dawn of the universe? What dawned it? You know, how did it start? Who are we? What are we doing here?"

"You know what, though? He won't say it, but I will," Danheiser said. "They also trust him. And there's not a lot of people on the air that you can really tune in to and not think you're being fed a line of whatever. These guys out there, these other dudes, they're on there yelling and screaming, and they're cutting off callers. And the listeners have a sense of trust with George, they know they can speak what's on their minds and he's not going to berate them or make them feel little—like a little person."

EACH NIGHT, *Coast to Coast* begins at ten o'clock L.A. time with a rundown of the day's news. Tonight's show includes a report from Alex Jones, a frequent correspondent (and the creator of the film *Endgame: Blueprint for Global Enslavement*), about Timothy Geithner meeting with the Bilderbergs in Athens: "They're considering this weekend whether they want to have a prolonged, agonizing depression that dooms the world to decades of stagnation, decline, and poverty, or an intense but shorter depression that paves the way for a new sustainable Economic World Order," Jones explains.

"It is truly amazing, Alex," Noory says. "Keep your eye on the Bilderberg Group."

Standing behind his microphone, looking down at his notes, Noory discusses the Hubble repairs, the woes at Chrysler, the conviction of a man who had been carving up cadavers and selling them, and a study on health risks for night-shift workers. Finally, he mentions a Seattle artist who developed horse-leg extensions for people seeking

a “taller and more graceful” look, which he admits is “kind of creepy.”

“That’s on the same level as the clown with razor teeth—It, remember? What is it with the person who created these things? I would say some kind of contact with a *specific type* of E.T. being, wouldn’t you?” he asks, knowingly. “And if so, would you think this person must have had *good* experiences with these types of beings? *I don’t think so.*” Noory then introduces the first guest, a paleo-psychologist named Howard Bloom, known as the “human computer.” The phone lines light up. I’m sitting with Danheiser in the producer’s booth, which overlooks the studio through a soundproof window, and listening in to the calls on a headset. They get hundreds each night, through lines apportioned into five categories: East of the Rockies, West of the Rockies, First-Time Callers, International Callers, and, everyone’s favorite, the Wildcard Line. (Sometimes they’ll dedicate another line for specific topics, like one for time travelers, or vampires.)

“Are you a freak?” Danheiser asks the first caller. Tonight’s program is about freaks. A study published in the journal *BMC Ecology* found that some predators avoid animals that look different from the rest of their species, possibly offering an evolutionary advantage. Noory asks Bloom how the finding might relate to humans.

“Freaks, geeks, and rebels have got a very, very strange advantage,” Bloom says. “In most things we’re sort of disadvantaged, but society needs us very badly—we’re its eyes and ears, we’re its antenna, we’re the way it stretches out and finds new things.”

Ralph from Oceanside, California, on the West of the Rockies line, is telling Danheiser a rambling tale about mysterious desert cats of unusual jumping ability. Danheiser listens impatiently, then interrupts him and puts him on hold. On Noory’s monitor, he types: “Ralph, Oceanside, CA—FLAG.” The flag, I assume, means don’t take this crazy call. In fact, it means just the opposite—take this crazy call as soon as you can. Callers who are too polished (boring callers, in the vernacular) sometimes have a harder time getting through, though Danheiser admits that the line between interesting and unhinged is a fine one. And unlike producers for most other shows, Danheiser doesn’t indicate to Noory what the callers intend to talk about (for example, “Roger, Delaware—hates Obama’s tax plan”). “We want it to be a surprise,” Danheiser says.

Noory lets Ralph have his say on air about the suspect cats—40 pounds or so, eight-foot jumping ability—then says: “Wow,” betraying no doubts. “You always wonder, Howard, how many more different oddities are out there on this planet.”

Noory can be an uneven broadcaster. Sometimes he seems to not pay full attention to his guests, offers strangely obvious commentary, or—and this has alienated some fans—lets clearly delusional or pseudoscientific assertions slide by without challenge. But he listens, with heroic patience, to all of his callers. He does the show live on holidays, he says, because that’s when the listeners need him most. For the same reason, he takes only a third of his allotted vacation time. Listeners send him thousands of cards and e-mails for his birthday. When I speak with Danheiser alone in his office later, he says that in all his years of commercial radio—working for the likes of Jim Cramer, Suze Orman, and Dr. Laura—he has

never known a host who has a more intense connection with his or her audience.

As Noory patiently listens to callers explaining the ways in which they’re freakish—“I really, truly believe in boron,” Robin in Toronto says—he seems to me the polar opposite of a commercial radio host as typically understood. He doesn’t shout, he talks to guests calmly for 40-odd minutes in an hour, he has no discernible politics, and, perhaps most shocking of all, he seems to respect his callers. Through such heresies, Noory’s quiet evangelism wins converts, and creates undeniably riveting entertainment—so riveting, in fact, that on good nights you’re never quite able to dismiss what you’re hearing as entertainment. The show is an exemplar of the art of the plausible.

During the break, Noory’s voice booms through an intercom into the producer’s booth. “Give me the strange ones if you can find them.”

“Yeah, I know,” Danheiser says.

SINCE THE EARLIEST radio broadcasts, the nighttime airwaves have abided hucksters, charlatans, and snake-oil salesmen of all kinds. But they’ve also enabled a bond between host and audience unlike any other in American media. Even so, the nighttime was considered so unprofitable that it became known, early and forever, as the dead zone. A few surpassing talents—like Barry Gray and Jean Shepherd—achieved relative success during the late shift. But more often, stations that stayed on the air at night tended to broadcast replays of earlier shows, or religious programs, or infomercials.

Noory’s lineage as a host traces most directly to WOR in New York City, in the 1950s, and a late-night circus refereed by Long John Nebel. Nebel’s show resembled nothing else at the time: he offered unprecedented airtime to callers, talked to guests involved in all manner of cosmic or governmental intrigue, and became a pitchman for products that would shame the ShamWow guy. Nebel’s authorized biography is called *Long John Nebel: Radio Talk King, Master Salesman, Magnificent Charlatan*. Larry King succeeded Nebel in 1978, and dominated the nighttime radio airwaves for the next decade with a national variety show.

Then, in the early 1990s, Alan Corbeth, a radio consultant, was looking to bring interesting local programs to national syndication. He started listening to an overnight political show hosted by Art Bell, broadcasting out of KDWN, in Las Vegas.

Corbeth had grown up listening to Nebel, and he remembered the strange hold a nighttime host could exert on the listener. He thought Bell had the right temperament and connection to make it nationally. Everyone else thought Corbeth was crazy. Advertising agencies laughed at him when he tried to sell time on the show. His friends in the business, he says, were even more dismissive. “They told me, ‘That’s stupid, there’s nobody listening, you’re wasting your time, and by the way, you can’t make any money anyway because who the hell is going to pay any kind of significant advertising rates on an overnight radio show?’”

At the time, Bell generally adhered to a traditional political format, but about once a week, he’d dedicate a show to the

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paranormal—and the pair noticed that interest in the program would spike. So, tired of political debate anyway, Bell devoted the program full-time to exploring the netherworld of American life. He started hosting his show from a double-wide trailer in a fenced-in compound in the desert town of Pahrump, Nevada, not far from Area 51, the infamous Air Force base thought (by a certain constituency) to house the government's UFO-research labs.

"It really, really caught on at that point," Corbeth says. So much so that within a few years their syndication grew to hundreds of stations, advertising sold out, and listeners flooded the office with requests for tapes of classic shows. In 1998, Jacor Communications, then Premiere's parent company, bought the show (and a handful of lesser ones) for \$9 million, and made Corbeth a senior vice president. (A year later, Clear Channel Communications bought Jacor for \$3.8 billion.)

To the narrow but impassioned base of paranormal believers, the show changed the dynamic of the national conversation—suddenly, with *The X-Files* ascendant and millennial dread rising, they were being taken seriously. "*Coast to Coast* was absolutely critical," says Stephen Bassett, the organizer

ubiquitous discount insurer; Ixquick, the search engine that doesn't spy on you. "People that listen to this kind of radio are paying attention—it's foreground, it's like watching television," says Michael Harrison, editor of the trade publication *Talkers*. Noory, with his soothing voice and amiable persona, is perfectly suited for a syndicated, corporatized *Coast to Coast*, for a show that's now a bit more Ventura Boulevard than Pahrump, Nevada. This gentle mainstreaming—which Noory freely admits to—seems to be what most irks online dissenters who dissect broadcasts with the zeal of true believers and refer to Noory as "Snoory." But it's also what has enabled the *Coast to Coast* phenomenon to spread into the broader American culture.

Bassett tracks mainstream news coverage of alien-related material. His firm, Paradigm Research Group, has found that the number of English-language articles mentioning the topic increased nearly sixfold between 2006 and 2008—and when we spoke, 2009 was on a record-setting pace. His tally doesn't include the tabloids, he adds, or recent coverage on CNN, Fox News, ABC, the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, the Learning Channel, and, of course,

"I BELIEVE THAT THERE ARE GROUPS ON THIS PLANET WHO CONTROL GOVERNMENTS," NOORY SAYS. "I'M NOT GOING TO GIVE THE NAMES. BUT WE ALL SUSPECT WHO THEY MAY BE."

of the X-Conference and the only registered lobbyist known to agitate Congress about UFOs. "From that point forward, we had an audience."

But the corporate marriage was soon troubled: Bell suffered a series of personal tribulations—his son was kidnapped, he was falsely accused of molestation, he had health problems, enemies were made—and he quit the show more than once. A brief interregnum of unsatisfactory replacements followed his final retirement; ratings plummeted and listeners aired dark theories about why Bell had really left.

(Bassett has one: "I believe that elements within the U.S. government got alarmed. Suddenly this issue is on late-night radio frequently, and it's starting to get traction and people are paying attention, and the government got a little scared. And I think they went aggressive. That's when all hell started breaking loose. I mean, you had people having heart attacks, break-ins, phone taps, the vicious attacks on Bell—I mean the shit hit the fan.")

Corbeth called George Noory, still known as the Nighthawk, in St. Louis, and hired him as Bell's full-time replacement. Corbeth told me that Noory's chief qualification, aside from his familiarity with the paranormal, was simple geniality. "George, quite frankly, was just a guy who was willing to roll up his sleeves and do whatever it took," he said.

The program has by some measures surpassed its former listenership and become one of the most successful talk shows in the country, day or night. And its national advertisers have found in its loyal and credulous audience a lucrative niche for products that appeal to a certain sensibility: Lear Capital, purveyors of gold products, for those who know "things will get worse *before they get worse*"; Geico, the

the Sci-Fi Channel. From ghost hunters and UFO hunters to alien autopsies and secret societies, the schedules of previously sober TV stations now resemble a giant nightly X-Conference.

"It has definitely tapped into something in the American psyche," Corbeth said of *Coast to Coast*. "I think people are looking for answers. And they're looking for them anywhere they can find them. They see a world which is very, very troubled, and getting scarier by the day, and I think they're looking for some escape."

IN A 1958 ESSAY, Carl Jung tried to come to terms with what he called the "dark problem" of UFO sightings, which at the time were reaching a peak. "The psychic situation of mankind and the UFO phenomenon as a physical reality bear no recognizable causal relationship to one another," he wrote, "but they seem to coincide in a meaningful manner."

In the occult generally and in UFOs in particular, Jung saw a strong connection to the decline of the Christian worldview. The concept of Christ as a savior, he wrote,

reflects a profound psychic need which does not simply disappear when the expression of it ceases to be valid. What happens to the energy that once kept the idea alive and dominant over the psyche? A political, social, philosophical, and religious conflict of unprecedented proportions has split the consciousness of our age. When such tremendous opposites split asunder, we may expect with certainty that the need for a savior will make itself felt.

Coast to Coast offers a running nightly commentary on the modern quest for that savior. In the process, it confirms that

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what the historian Richard Hofstadter famously called “the paranoid style” has reached one of its periodic peaks. This style, which Hofstadter understood to include a “sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy,” today finds its clearest expression on talk radio—and not just at night. In fact, if you were to remove the explicitly political statements from the monologues of, say, Glenn Beck or Sean Hannity on a given day, what you’d have is a worldview that, in its understanding of the workings of power and its sense that some elusive but monstrous Truth is being withheld, very closely resembles George Noory’s.

“There’s no question that right-wing talk radio features that characteristic of distrust and fear that is a part of the text of *Coast to Coast*—fear of the unknown, fear of invasion, fear of being taken over by some kind of evil force,” says Michael C. Keith, a communications professor at Boston College and the author of *Sounds in the Dark: All-Night Radio in American Life*. “I think political talk radio is very much aware of the *Coast to Coast* phenomenon, and knows that if it pushes certain buttons, albeit with a political motif, it will also generate the right kind of response. All of this feeds paranoia, regardless of where it comes from.”

replied that he had, in fact, studied extra dimensions for 15 years, but saw nothing all that mysterious about them. “The thing to bear in mind is that extra dimensions are less exotic than the name ‘extra dimensions’ might lead you to think,” he said, deflatingly. “They’d be very similar to the ones you do see, there would just be more of them. So that doesn’t in any way link into the afterlife, doesn’t link into paranormal phenomena, it’s just more dimensions of space that we don’t have direct access to with our eyes.”

For three long hours, Greene acted like a parent debunking a willful child’s belief in Santa Claus. Time travel to the past was surely impossible, he said, and scientists had long ago stopped even trying. The prospect of a UFO visitation seemed dim, and he had seen no evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence. Life after death, much as we might yearn for it, wasn’t plausible scientifically.

But in the show’s final hour, Jim in Hendersonville, North Carolina, challenged him on that last one. A lot of researchers, Jim said, had come to the opposite conclusion about the afterlife—some of them even had videotape.

“Well, I’ve never studied the data,” Greene said, his condescension not entirely suppressed. “But I’ve certainly never

SOMETIMES NOORY LETS CLEARLY DELUSIONAL OR PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC ASSERTIONS SLIDE BY WITHOUT CHALLENGE. BUT HE LISTENS, WITH HEROIC PATIENCE, TO ALL OF HIS CALLERS.

But paranoia performs an important social function: it’s one way of ordering a disorderly world. Particularly a world in which the problems we face, from climate change to financial collapse to nuclear terrorism, are of a newly existential order, and our options for action are cosmically ineffectual. Through the paranoid worldview—through the belief in dark and interconnected and all-powerful conspiracies, terrestrial or otherwise—one may impose structure in a time of randomness, perceive meaning in a culture stripped of its religious moorings, imagine a degree of volition in a threatening world that increasingly seems beyond our power to influence. Listen to *Coast to Coast* at night, and you’ll hear the sound of millions of people trying to come to terms with what Yeats called “the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.”

LATE ONE NIGHT, as a warm breeze blew through my bedroom window, and only the hum of fans and air conditioners filled the ether, I tuned in to *Coast to Coast* to hear Brian Greene, the Columbia physicist and science-popularizer extraordinaire, join the program by phone. Greene seemed to me, at first, the perfect guest: a man who could answer questions about time travel and strangelets, black holes and wormholes, with good cheer and scientific coherence—a man who, like Noory, knew that things unseen animate the cosmos.

As the show progressed, though, and as Greene fielded call after strange call and question after question, he seemed to suck the life out of the show’s nightly connection. Noory brought up the concept of extra dimensions, a topic that would seem to brim with *Coast*-ish possibility. Greene

encountered *anything* that has convinced me, even in a slight degree, that there’s anything beyond death.”

Then something strange happened. For the first time in the years I’ve listened to the program, I detected what sounded, for all the world, like fear creep into George Noory’s amiable voice. “It—it just seems so empty,” he blurted.

It did, late at night, all alone. Greene’s view of the universe, for all his scientific enthusiasm, imperiled the *Coast to Coast* ethos in a way no UFO skeptic ever could. No ultimate mystery inhered in it, no potential savior inhabited it, nothing in its great expanse seemed to endow our little lives with meaning.

“That is a brute, cold, hard fact of the universe,” Greene said. “When you pull the battery out of your computer, it shuts off. When you end a life, it shuts off. And I think that’s just it.”

Noory didn’t want to let it go. “A lot of great cases, though, of near-death experiences *documented by doctors*—” he offered, hopefully.

“I think ‘near’ is the operative word there.”

Seconds of dead air ticked by, an eternity at night.

Then, in a rush, almost like he couldn’t help himself, Noory said, “But they do leave their body, they say.”

“Well, that’s what they say.”

Finally, reluctantly, George Noory conceded defeat.

“San Francisco we go. Max?”

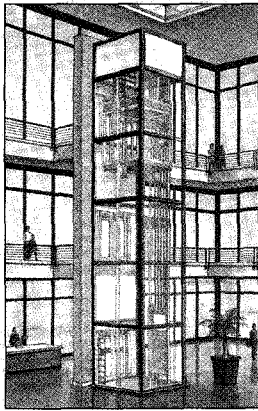
I turned the radio off. And I lay awake in bed, for a long time, in silence. ■

Timothy Lavin is an Atlantic associate editor.

Making History

This past fall, *The Atlantic* and the Aspen Institute convened the first Ideas Forum, bringing together journalists, policy makers, academics at the Newseum, hoping to arrive at a first draft of the history of our time. Attendees discussed subjects ranging from the recession to Afghanistan, from news to the condition of our schools. Several historians and history-minded people outside the academy also attended, and for this special section, we ask them to step back—way back—from the churn of the 24-hour news cycle and hold the Obama administration up against the sweep of our national history:

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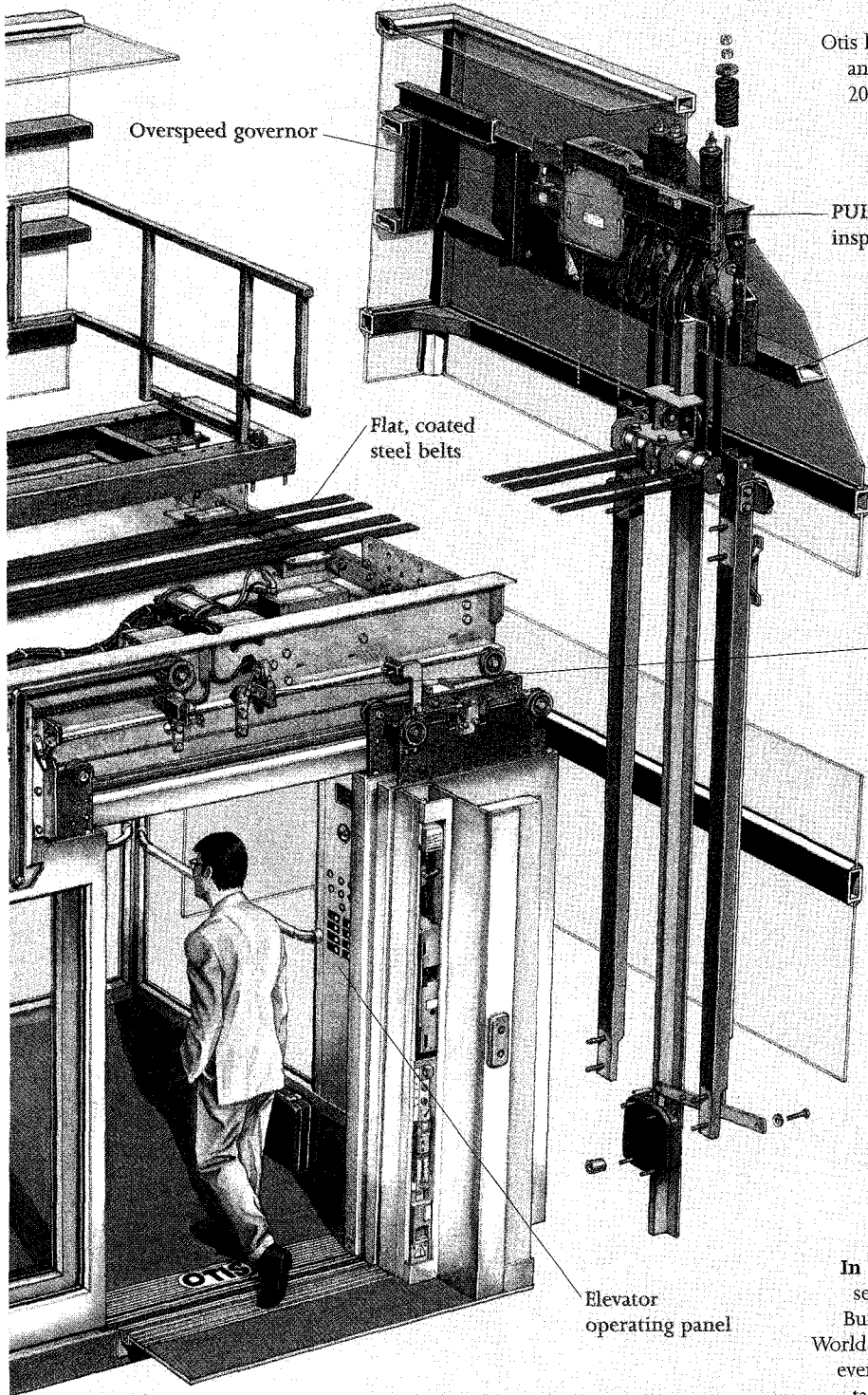
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The Honeymooners

One year in, Obama's approval ratings have slipped, and they're likely to get worse. He'll probably muddle through seven more years of partisan acrimony, small-bore achievements, and bitter disappointment. But this is okay. In fact, it's the definition of success for a modern president.

By DAVID GREENBERG

THE PROMISE AND selling point of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign—breaking with the past, delivering something new—was the oldest promise in American politics. Since European settlers crossed the Atlantic imagining (mistakenly) a “new world” without history, Americans have rewarded talk of new beginnings. The

early colonists sought to create a society de novo in ways that Europe—with its religious wars, social stratification, and finitude of land—made impossible. To the Revolutionary generation, the acts of declaring independence and drafting a constitution seemed to ratify this mythology. And in every era since, Americans have fallen, starry-eyed, for leaders who speak of a future unencumbered

by history's weight. Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism, Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom, FDR's New Deal, JFK's New Frontier, even George H. W. Bush's New World Order—all began with the promise of the new.

Of course, after the flush of a campaign, both voters and presidents have invariably discovered that history imposes constraints. After the Civil War, a

cohort of young intellectuals invested hope in Ulysses S. Grant, only to see rampant corruption persist and the dream of reconstructing the South dissolve. After World War I, the crash-and-burn of Wilson's noble quest for "peace without victory" soured Americans on an energetic executive for a decade. Bill Clinton's New Covenant, a dead-on-arrival slogan, presaged the letdown that came as his followers realized that liberalism's revival would require more than a few token compromises.

Obama in 2008 was just the latest aspirant to talk of beginning anew. He bested Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination in part by saddling her with the record of not one but two past presidents: the residual regret over her husband's supposedly small-bore and blandly centrist Third Way agenda, and the collective buyers' remorse over the Iraq War. In contrast to the dreaded "incrementalism" of the Clintons, Obama's candidacy tantalized voters with a chance for what he called "transformational" or "fundamental" change.

One year later, transformation looks like a fleeting dream. No one knows whether Obama can deliver massive change on the scale of Lincoln, Wilson, FDR, or LBJ. But right now, the opportunity that loomed last fall seems to have passed. Conservatives—uncharacteristically mute last winter—have regained their voice, nearly derailing Obama's health-care plan and keeping the administration on defense in the daily media wars. Meanwhile, liberals and leftists, who largely muffled their doubts when Obama had a presidency to win, are suddenly seething over his moderation and compromises—keeping suspected terrorists jailed indefinitely, countenancing his treasury secretary's coziness with financial CEOs, letting center-right senators weaken his health-care plan. Washington pundits, for their part, intoned throughout 2009 that in taking on health care, energy, and financial reform in his first year, the president was attempting "too much."

Yet the now-prevalent pessimism about Obama's presidency is surely unwarranted. True, we can no longer expect Obama to be the agent of a post-partisan politics, or an uncorrupted anti-politician incapable of spin or

triangulation, or America's most civil-libertarian president, or a socialist. But in the modern age, presidents are never able to meet such expectations. Our hunger for presidential intervention, leadership, and salvation now exceeds any individual's capacities. So the eclipse of these campaign-trail fantasies about Obama's presidency hardly signals its death. On the contrary, it marks the true beginning.

"If there is anything that history has taught us," John F. Kennedy said on the campaign trail in 1960, "it is that the great accomplishments of Woodrow Wilson and of Franklin Roosevelt were made in the early days, months, and years of their administrations. That was the time for maximum action." But Kennedy was wrong—unless you choose to focus exclusively on the word *years* instead of *days* and *months*. As rich in opportunity as presidential honeymoons can be—and the best executives have used them to get important things done—a president's real work doesn't occur when he has what Obama calls the righteous wind at his back. It occurs when he has to soldier on into a fight, despite blustery headwinds.

Like the unit of 100 days, the benchmark of a president's first year matters a lot to journalists but relatively little to historians. The 100-days concept itself, which originated with Roosevelt's flurry of activity in early 1933, soon devolved into a transparent public-relations gimmick, as media-age presidents sweated over how to boost their grades on what soon came to be recognized as the president's initial report card. Similarly, the now-ritualized year-one evaluation, though harmless as an exercise in journalistic stock-taking, offers a weak basis for predicting future performance. Indeed, none of the three presidents Obama has taken as his role models—Lincoln, FDR, and Kennedy—enjoyed a first year that foretold the direction of his presidency. Transformation doesn't happen overnight.

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN IS Obama's favorite president and his aspirational model. In 2007, the senator from Illinois launched his bid for the Oval Office in Lincoln's shadow, on the steps of the Springfield Old State Capitol. With his message of national conciliation, Obama often echoed Lincoln's second inaugural address. Even when he attacked his rivals, he suggested that he was merely combating their retrogressive politics, while he was summoning the better angels of our nature. At times, the Lincoln comparisons taxed credulity: Obama's devotees even pointed to Lincoln's one-term service in Congress—and his subsequent rise to become America's greatest president—to answer the charge that Obama hadn't accomplished enough in his career to earn him the White House. It was

no surprise when, in January 2009, the incoming president took his inaugural oath on the Bible Lincoln had used, and presided over festivities branded as "A New Birth of Freedom."

Yet as Obama surely knows, Lincoln—a transformative president if there ever was one—started his administration on a shaky note. His inaugural address fumblingly extended an olive

branch to the seceding states of the South, promising (to no avail) that he would enforce the fugitive-slave law and uphold slavery in the states where it was legal. The Confederate attack on Fort Sumter forced Lincoln to change course. But on the crucial matter of slavery, the president—who had never considered himself an abolitionist—remained fairly conservative. "If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it," he wrote to Horace Greeley in 1862, "and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Few foresaw that his presidency would end with the abolition of slavery and a redefinition of freedom, union, and equality.

Lincoln also needed time to gain his footing as commander in chief. Unsure of himself in military affairs, he was at the mercy of his generals, including the aging and detached Winfield Scott. Dispiriting defeats—notably at the First Battle of Bull Run, in July 1861—emboldened the South. Even after Lincoln mustered the wisdom to replace Scott, George B. McClellan, his new top commander, frustrated the president by declining to advance against Confederate forces. As for his domestic agenda, Lincoln, like most 19th-century presidents, followed Congress's lead. But even there, despite a Republican leadership eager to exploit the sudden absence of Southerners, major laws—the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railway Act, and the Morrill Land Grant Act—didn't get the president's signature until 1862.

NO ONE COULD SAY that Franklin Roosevelt began his first year in office hesitantly. His first 100 days were indeed a whirlwind of legislative and executive feats. But FDR geared his first-year efforts almost entirely toward recovery—a necessary but hardly transformative goal.

Certain measures—like solving the banking crisis, which had reached catastrophic proportions on the eve of his inauguration—made a palpable difference. But the core elements of FDR's "First New Deal" turned out to be, on the whole, ineffectual or unconstitutional—or both. The National Recovery Administration, the centerpiece of it all, which relied on industry leaders to agree to production codes, was flawed in both conception and execution, and it failed miserably. When the Supreme Court unanimously ruled it unconstitutional, Roosevelt's aide Robert Jackson called the decision a blessing in disguise, since it spared the president from having to watch Congress decline to renew the act. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, which regulated farm production through central planning, was also struck down. And then there was Roosevelt's Economy Act, a misguided effort in budget balancing taken up before Washington discovered the wisdom of deficit spending.

Most of the New Deal's lasting elements didn't come until 1935. Only after taking a beating on the airwaves from

demagogic populists like Senator Huey Long of Louisiana and the radio priest Charles Coughlin did FDR sign on to the Social Security Act, which created unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and a safety net for the disabled. And not until his second term did his administration embrace a Keynesian strategy of aggressive spending to lift the economy out of crisis. If Roosevelt's first year was historic for its activist spirit and purposeful intervention, its economic philosophy left little mark.

WHILE OBAMA STYLED himself Lincolnian in his rhetoric of reconciliation, and Rooseveltian in his steadfastness in the face of economic distress, he just as often summoned the Kennedy mystique, presenting himself as the telegenic, inspirational torchbearer of an ascendant generation. Obama suggested that he wanted to "move the country in a fundamentally different direction," as he believed Kennedy had. Just as Kennedy's election shattered the anti-Catholic taboo in presidential politics, Obama's promised to topple an age-old wall of racial prejudice. The Baby Boomers who flocked to Obama's candidacy said he brought back memories of JFK. The claim was echoed most tellingly by the fallen president's own brother, who anointed Obama as JFK's successor after perceiving a slight to the family name in Hillary Clinton's assertion that the skill of Lyndon Johnson—she didn't mention Jack—had been instrumental in passing the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

In fact, on civil rights, as in other areas, Kennedy's first-year performance dismayed his enthusiasts. As a candidate, he had vowed to desegregate federal housing with "a stroke of the presidential pen." But once in office, he demurred; fearful of alienating powerful southern Democrats whose support he needed on other issues, he focused instead on foreign-policy problems. Not until he'd cleared the 1962 midterm elections did Kennedy issue the housing proclamation. Caution likewise informed his response to the Freedom Riders—the activists who rode buses across the South starting in May 1961 to force the government to uphold the Supreme Court's desegregation of interstate travel. When white

southerners brutally beat the activists, Kennedy and his aides, unprepared, at first tried to stop the rides, sending in federal marshals only when it seemed that the violence might turn deadly.

In foreign policy, too, the biggest developments of JFK's debut year yielded little positive transformation. The Bay of Pigs invasion, an ill-conceived CIA scheme hatched under Dwight Eisenhower, redounded to Kennedy's benefit only because he had the sense not to duck responsibility. At his June summit in Vienna with Nikita Khrushchev, the new president felt he was verbally pummeled by the Soviet premier, in what Kennedy called the "roughest thing in my life." Kennedy's tepid response may have encouraged Khrushchev to erect the Berlin Wall that fall. When that happened, too, JFK was slow to act (KENNEDY: YOU CAN'T STOP TANKS WITH WORDS, read one West Berliner's protest sign), and even his decision to send retired General Lucius Clay and Vice President Johnson to West Berlin to boost morale did nothing to deter the Soviets. At the end of 1961, Kennedy's aide Ted Sorensen mentioned that two reporters were considering writing books about the year gone by. Kennedy was mystified: "Who would want to read a book on disasters?"

THE PRESIDENCY THAT Obama's resembles most so far isn't any of these but, ironically, that of Bill Clinton—ironic because Obama, speaking in January 2008 about what makes a good president, implicitly denigrated Clinton even as he praised Ronald Reagan for having "changed the trajectory of America" and "put us on a fundamentally different path." Obama, many speculated at the time, may have been playing head games with his peevish predecessor, goading him into another outburst that would thrill the press pack. Even so, it was a strange reading of history. Reagan's election, after all, did not initiate but culminated a long conservative effort to gain control of the levers of power; his decisions as president moved his party to the right, but they also introduced fissures and frustrations into the conservative alliance. Clinton's tenure, in contrast, began a new era for the Democrats, and after his eight years, virtually all of the party's leading lights

embraced what had been controversial stands in 1992: an internationalist foreign policy, a growth-centered economics, and a willingness to link social policies to family values.

The point would be trivial had Obama not reached for Clinton's 1992 playbook during the fall 2008 campaign. Obama's battle with John McCain, which centered on the hard-pressed middle class, showed that Obama represented less a repudiation of Clinton (as the primaries had suggested) than a continuation. His rhetoric wafted to earth to focus on everyday economic concerns. His convention speech opened, after the preliminaries, not with soaring visions of post-partisan unity but with issue-based, it's-the-economy-stupid plain language:

Tonight, more Americans are out of work and more are working harder for less. More of you have lost your homes and even more are watching your home values plummet. More of you have cars you can't afford to drive, credit-card bills you can't afford to pay, and tuition that's beyond your reach.

Obama discovered this idiom just in time for the financial chaos and the debates with McCain.

Obama's successes and struggles in his first year bear striking resemblances to Clinton's. Both men were elected with similar mandates—Clinton won 370 electoral votes, Obama 365—and majorities in both houses of Congress. Both opened their first years well by signing a few queued-up executive orders and bills—including the Family and Medical Leave Act, for Clinton, and the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and the expansion of the Children's Health Insurance Program, for Obama. And both made economic revival their first priority. Both men also entered office facing tooth-and-nail resistance from a right wing that had just lost the presidency. The right imagined Clinton, as it does Obama, to be far more radical than he really was, and it thus tried to delegitimize him. A short line connects the "Who shot Vince Foster?" conspiracy theories to those surrounding Obama's citizenship.

Republicans also forced Clinton to pass his first economic plan without

their support, much as they tried to scuttle Obama's stimulus package. And despite losing the legislative battle, they succeeded in shaping public perception of these economic bills after their passage. Clinton's 1993 budget—which not only set the government on course for a record surplus, but also cut taxes for millions while raising them on very few—was nonetheless portrayed, and viewed by most Americans, as a tax hike. In parallel fashion, economic evidence suggests that Obama's spring stimulus bill has already done some appreciable good. But according to an August Gallup poll, Americans consider it too big and are uncertain about its benefits. And while Obama seems likely, as

of this writing, to emerge from his first health-care fight with more to show for it than Clinton did from his, the final bill probably won't be more than an incremental step or two forward—less like Medicare than like the 1996 Kennedy-Kassebaum Act, a now-forgotten consolation prize that Clinton garnered later in his presidency.

THE REASSERTION OF POLITICAL limits and the deflation of campaign-season euphoria make it unlikely that Obama's presidency will be "transformational" in the sense that he spoke of on the campaign trail—Lincolnian in its boldness, Rooseveltian in its activism, or Kennedyesque in its uplift. More likely, it will resemble Clinton's presidency, with eight years of muddling through, frequent bouts of sharp partisan opposition, fluctuating poll ratings, and dashed hopes.

This should be no cause for distress. Obama could do worse than to emulate Clinton, who, at the end of the day, left the country better off than when he took office. Clinton's record remains undervalued, partly because a misleading narrative took hold (that his impeachment cost him the chance to do more), and partly because many of his gains were achieved not through the big-ticket stand-alone legislation that journalists

recite in their year-end summaries but through less visible allocations within the interstices of the federal budget. No single law or presidential order gave us the longest economic expansion in history, the lowest unemployment rates in three decades, or the declines in poverty, crime, and teen pregnancy. Nor

does Clinton deserve sole credit for these feats. But all were accomplished during his eight years.

Twenty-five years ago, the political scientist Theodore Lowi published a book called *The Personal President*. It argued that the increasingly large responsibilities placed on the president since Franklin Roosevelt's time—of regulation, social provision, and

economic management, to say nothing of the leadership of the free world—have exploded into impossible expectations. Every postwar chief executive, Lowi noted—and the observation still holds—has begun his presidency with high approval ratings and left office with the public chastened of its early optimism, if not disillusioned altogether. (The president who has exited the White House with the highest approval ratings, post-FDR, is Clinton.)

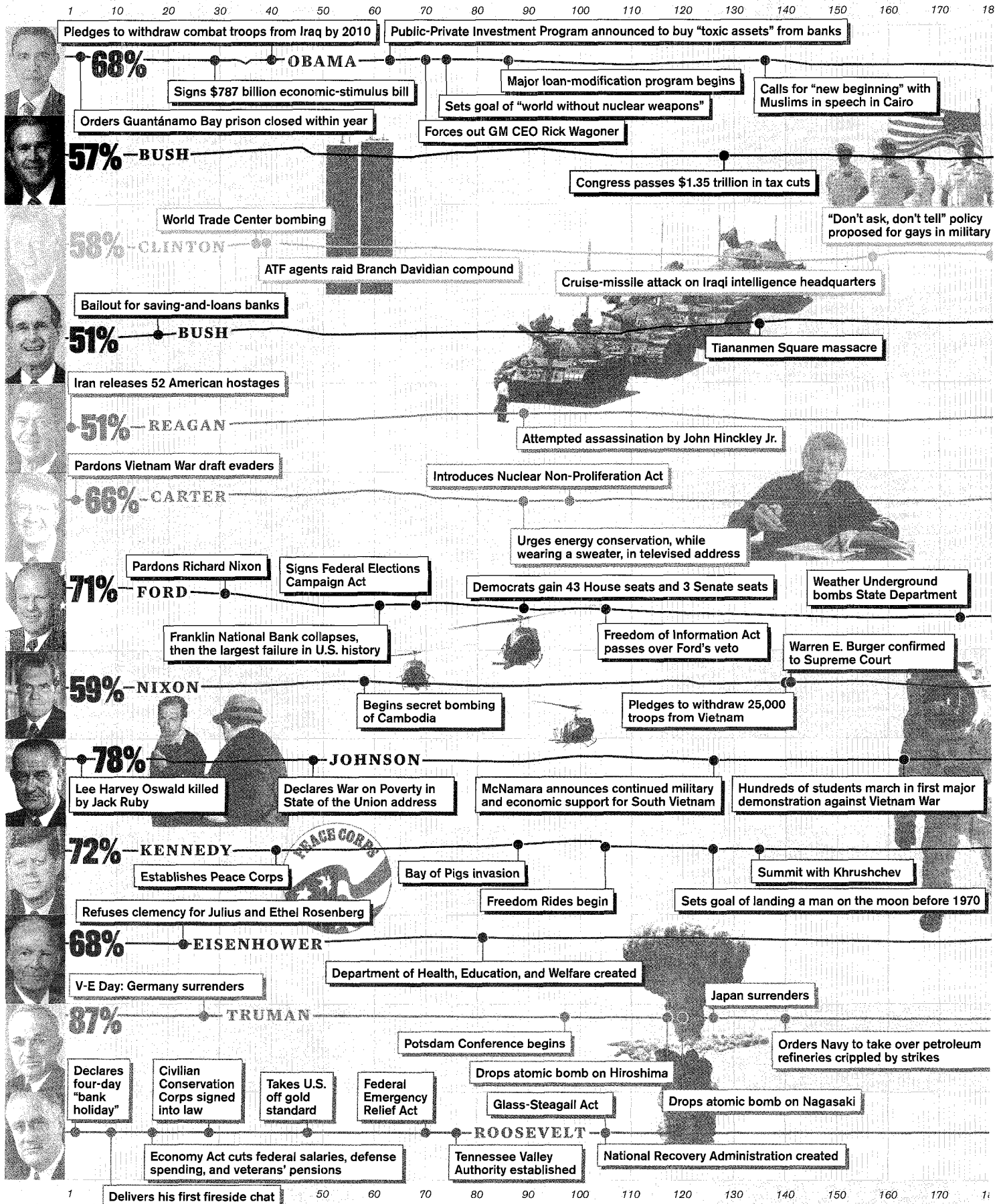
It is easy to propose that we lower our expectations for our new presidents—even, or perhaps especially, for presidents who come bearing lofty promises of transformation. But we can't correct the problem, Lowi's diagnosis suggested, simply by resolving to demand less from our chief executives or by vowing to learn from the past. The problem is rooted in nothing less than the presidency's assumption of immense powers, and of a central role in our imagination. Candidates have no better path to victory than by inspiring us with dreams of a new political era, and presidents have no choice but to attempt "too much." In doing so, however, they can only disappoint us. ■

David Greenberg, a historian at Rutgers University, is the author of *Nixon's Shadow: The History of an Image*.

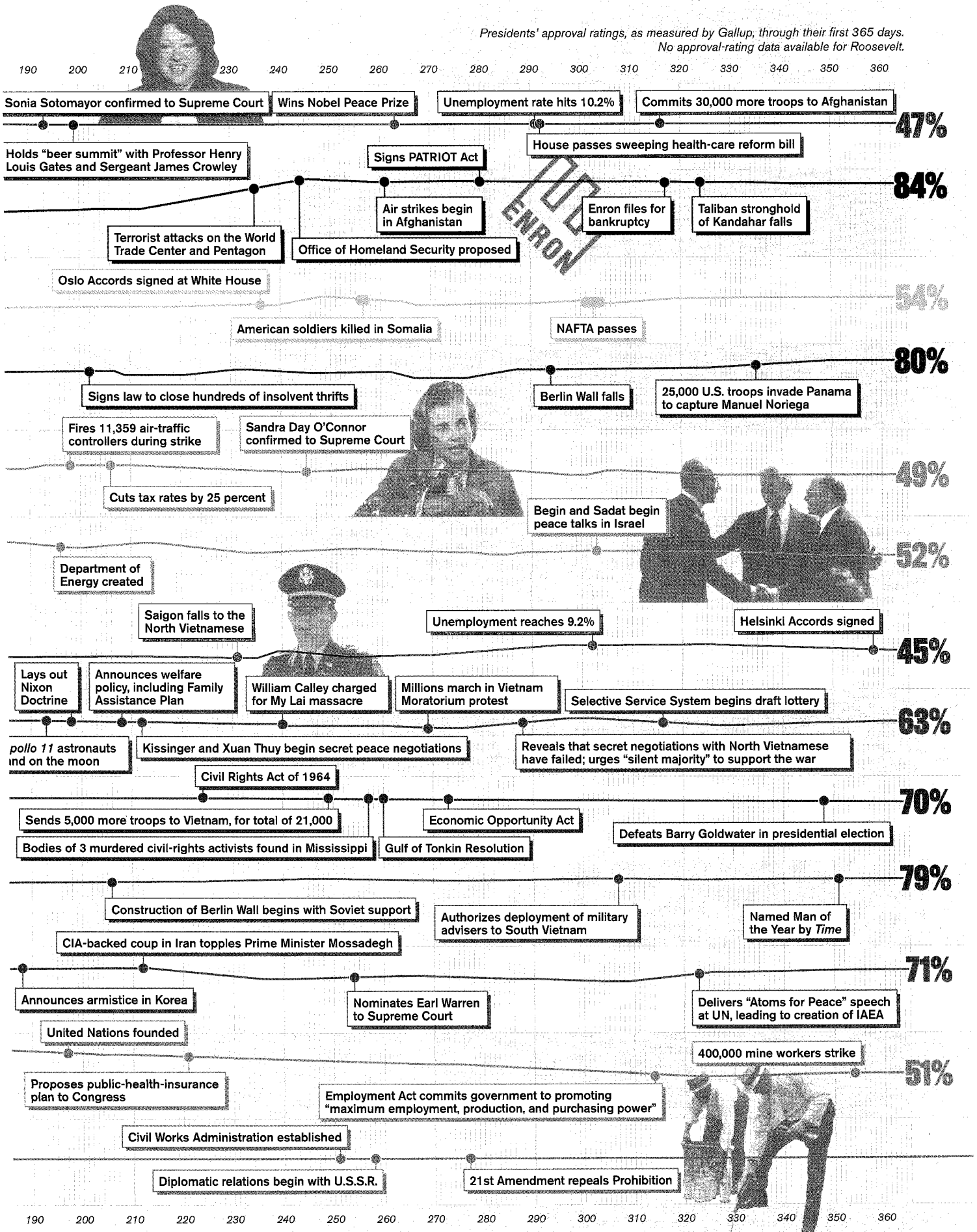
The ever-expanding responsibilities placed on our presidents have raised impossible expectations. Once in office, they can only disappoint us.

OPENING ACTS

Obama's approval ratings over his first year, in historical context



Presidents' approval ratings, as measured by Gallup, through their first 365 days.
No approval-rating data available for Roosevelt.



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Bring Back the Mugwumps

During the late 19th century, a handful of Republican reformers earned the scorn of their party by standing up for their ideas—which went on to triumph. Today’s conservatives would be smart to follow their lead.

By DAVID FRUM

THEY SAY HISTORY is written by the winners, but in the United States, at least, that is not true. Losers like the Confederacy, the 1930s Communists, and the 1960s New Left have received good press. Winners like the great industrialists of the 19th century and the American conservative movement of the 1970s? Not so much.

Of all American history’s unloved winners, however, few have attained

the unpopularity achieved by the 19th-century political reformers disfigured by the ludicrous label “Mugwumps.” So it may seem more than a little strange for me to suggest that they are exactly the group to whom American conservatives should turn for inspiration in the age of Obama.

The justification for my seemingly bizarre suggestion will take us pretty deep into many students’ least favorite chapter of American history: the four decades between the Civil War and the

presidency of Teddy Roosevelt. Stick with me. The lights of contemporary relevance will switch on, one by one.

If you could visit a big political rally or convention in the 1880s, you’d discover a party system unexpectedly reminiscent of today’s. Then as now, partisanship was intense. Then as now, partisans lived in closed worlds. They read only the newspapers that confirmed their respective prejudices, lived in towns and neighborhoods that tilted overwhelmingly to one party or

another, celebrated different sets of heroes, and disdained different villains.

You think Rush Limbaugh or Keith Olbermann talks harshly? Listen to this campaign speech from 1880:

Every man that tried to destroy the Government, every man that shot at the holy flag in heaven, every man that starved our soldiers, every keeper of Libby, Andersonville and Salisbury, every man that wanted to burn the negro, every one that wanted to scatter yellow fever in the North, every man that opposed human liberty, that regarded the auction-block as an altar and the howling of the bloodhound as the music of the Union, every man who wept over the corpse of slavery, that thought lashes on the back were a legal tender for labor performed, every one willing to rob a mother of her child—every solitary one was a Democrat.

That was Robert Ingersoll, one of the most famous orators of his day, stumping for the Republicans. Think of him when people tell you that today's political discourse has sunk below the standards of the hallowed past.

But the politics of the 1880s resembled our own in another way—a way that makes the ridiculous Mugwumps suddenly seem very relevant.

The political fury of the 1880s was a strangely empty fury. The issues that most enflamed Americans in those days were left over from two decades before: the issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction. On practical, immediate questions, the two parties hardly differed: they were both equally irrelevant to the problems of the day. The opening plank of the 14-point Democratic platform of 1880 pledged continuity with the great traditions of the party's past, without ever specifying what those traditions were. Four more planks fulminated against a federal panel's decision in the 1876 election to award 20 disputed electoral votes—and thus the presidency—to the Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes. The only unambiguous point in the platform was the 11th: a call for a ban on all Chinese immigration. That was also the clearest point in the Republican platform—the main difference being that the Republicans preferred to ban Chinese immigration by negotiation

with China, rather than by unilateral U.S. action.

From our contemporary point of view, the most urgent and contentious issue on the national agenda in 1880 would seem to have been the condition of the freed slaves of the South. Yet here, too, the two parties had reached an understanding: no more federal intervention to protect the political or civil rights of black Americans. The former abolitionist James Garfield felt more personal sympathy for black Americans than any other president from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt. Yet even he, in his inaugural address, could say only that black Americans had been “surrendered to their own guardianship.” The freed slaves were abandoned to the mercy of their neighbors as utterly under Republican presidents as under Democrats.

This highly ritualized approach to politics, this pretense of great disagreement, is familiar in our own time. A quarter century ago, Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale offered Americans substantial policy alternatives. In 2010, by contrast, we see the parties hammering each other over differences barely more perceptible than those of 1880. Republicans rage against the Democrats' bailouts, takeovers, deficits—yet all three commenced under George W. Bush, not Barack Obama. Almost every concept in Obama's intensely controversial health plan has at one point or another been advanced by a senior Republican, from Bob Dole to Mitt Romney. I type these words having just watched Fox News's Glenn Beck liken President Obama's call for voluntary national service to something out of Maoist China. Obama's service program barely differs in form, content, and rhetoric from Bush's program, which in turn was almost identical to the program created by the elder President Bush in 1989.

Reading a speech like Ingersoll's—or listening to today's talk radio—you almost wonder whether strident rhetoric, then as now, functions more as a substitute for policy differences than as their expression.

Don't misunderstand: North versus South, Catholic versus Protestant, farm versus city, property owner versus laborer, old-stock versus immigrant, white versus nonwhite—these divisions

and many others incited mistrust, anger, and hatred. It's just that these divisions did not much translate into party policy. If you were a northern Protestant, you were probably a Republican; if you were a northern Catholic, you were probably a Democrat. Yet on practical questions, the two parties converged on almost exactly the same answers, like two fiercely competitive cola manufacturers arriving at almost exactly the same formula.

A ferocious but highly choreographed politics, intensely felt but also remote from the concerns of everyday life: that was American politics 125 years ago, and in many respects it is American politics today. And that was the politics against which the political reformers of the 1870s and 1880s struggled.

Mostly northeastern, well educated, and comfortably affluent, these reformers formed a type that has always rubbed Americans the wrong way: a self-conscious political elite that claims to speak for the public good. The names of some Mugwumps still resound in American history: Carl Schurz and Henry Adams, Mark Twain and Charles Eliot Norton. Others, such as the civil-service reformer George Curtis, have gone brown with age. Famous or not so famous, they had to make the political decision of a lifetime in 1884, when the Republican Party nominated for president one of the most tainted men in Washington: Senator James G. Blaine.

Nobody ever proved Blaine crooked, but he was widely believed to have engaged in shady business dealings and to have accepted large personal gifts from corporate benefactors. A contemporary cartoon depicted him as “the tattooed man,” with the names of his manifold scandals stamped on his body. Blaine's imposing mansion still stands near Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C. Even at 19th-century construction prices, he could hardly have afforded to build it on a senator's salary. His house in Augusta, Maine, which he owned at the same time, is now the governor's mansion.

Despite everything, most reformers had remained loyal to the Republican Party throughout the disappointing postwar years. The Blaine nomination,

however, was one outrage more than they could swallow. The Democratic nominee, Grover Cleveland, had won a reputation for honesty as the mayor of Buffalo and then the governor of New York. Cleveland supported civil-service reform, the gold standard, and free trade—the great causes of the reformers. As a block, they did something almost unimaginable in those days of white-hot partisan feelings: they broke with the party of Lincoln to support the nominee of the party of Jefferson Davis.

The editor of *The New York Sun*, Charles Dana, mocked these party-switchers as Mugwumps, a name he apparently took from an Algonquian Indian word for an important person—*self-important* was what Dana ironically meant to say. Other critics, less polite, drew them as absurd cartoon characters with their “mug” on one side of the fence and their “wump” on the other. Their opponents sneered at them as “hermaphrodites.” (The word *homosexual* had not yet entered the English language.) The boss of the New York state Republican Party, U.S. Senator Roscoe Conkling, who detested Blaine, nonetheless complained, “When Doctor Johnson defined patriotism as the last refuge of a scoundrel, he was unconscious of the then undeveloped capabilities of the word reform.”

In a tensely close election, who can assess what impact the Mugwumps had on the course of history? Cleveland won New York’s 36 electoral votes—and thus the presidency—by the razor-thin margin of 1,149 votes out of the 1,167,169 cast.

The 1884 party-switchers lethally damaged any ambitions they may have held for elective office. (Some who shared the sympathies of the Mugwump circle—notably Theodore Roosevelt and Henry Cabot Lodge—had been more prudent, and endorsed Blaine.) But over the succeeding decades, the Mugwump causes would one by one prevail.

The reformers wanted an end to patronage hiring in the civil service. In the 19th century, almost every job in federal, state, and local government, all the way down to the clerks and messengers, turned on Election Day. For hundreds of thousands of Americans, an election was not a vote on the issues,

but a referendum on a single urgent question: “Shall I keep my job?” The system conscripted every government worker—and everybody who hoped to become a government worker—into the machinery of the parties and compelled obedience to the party bosses. Beginning with the Pendleton Act of 1883, federal civil servants—and later state employees—were granted tenure for office so long as they competently performed their jobs. Over the next quarter century, the old patronage system and its accompanying kickbacks to the parties dwindled away.

The Mugwumps wanted the United States to resume free trade—not only as a matter of good economics, but also because they had witnessed how the switch to protectionism in 1861 had turned Congress into an auction house for industrial favors. The United States cut its high tariffs for a tragically brief period in 1913, but adopted free trade as a permanent policy after World War II.

The Mugwumps wanted to end congressional manipulation of the currency. They got their wish in 1900, when the United States wrote the gold standard into law, and in 1913, with the founding of the Federal Reserve. They also wanted secret ballots, printed by the government, not the parties, and effective measures against vote-stealing and ballot-stuffing.

Yet this record of success has gained little applause. The historian Richard Hofstadter memorably denigrated the Mugwumps as snobbish, blundering goody-goodies:

The typical Mugwump was a conservative in his economic and political views. He disdained, to be sure, the most unscrupulous of the new men of wealth, as he did the opportunistic, boodling, tariff-mongering politicians who served them. But the most serious abuses of the unfolding economic order of the Gilded Age he either resolutely ignored or accepted complacently as an inevitable result of the struggle for existence or the improvidence and laziness of the masses ... The Mugwump was shut off from the people as much by his social reserve and his amateurism as by his candidly conservative views.

Hofstadter certainly had a point. Henry Adams in particular was an

unappealing snob, brilliantly lampooned by Henry James in a short story. (Planning a party with his wife, the Adams character says, “Let us be vulgar and have some fun—let us invite the President.”) But if the Mugwumps were wrong to be offended by the use of the wrong fork, they were right to be offended by the abuse of slogans and the manipulations of loyalties to distract voters from the real issues of national importance. The Mugwump spirit is the spirit that says: “Enough. I refuse to be exploited by those who seek to misdirect my ideals to their advantage.”

Partisan affiliation nowadays carries less meaning than it did 125 years ago. Our divisions are more ideological and cultural than political: Red State versus Blue State, conservative versus liberal, religious versus secular. Yet today, again, many of the causes that seem to most agitate Americans on either side of these divides—like abortion and racism and reverse racism—seem frozen in time, left over from the culture wars of three and four decades back. Spend an evening watching cable news, and it’s a whole prime-time lineup of bloody-shirt-waving.

For people on my side of the aisle, the conservative side, the ancient causes seem especially distracting. Twenty-first-century America abounds in problems that ought to galvanize a modernized conservatism: excess government debt, onerous taxation of savings and investments, a dangerous overinvolvement of government in banking and finance, increasing dependence on energy from unfriendly sources, immigration policies that degrade the average skill and productivity of the American workforce, the strategic challenge from an emerging Chinese superpower. How are we to develop answers to these problems of tomorrow if in our minds it is forever 1969?

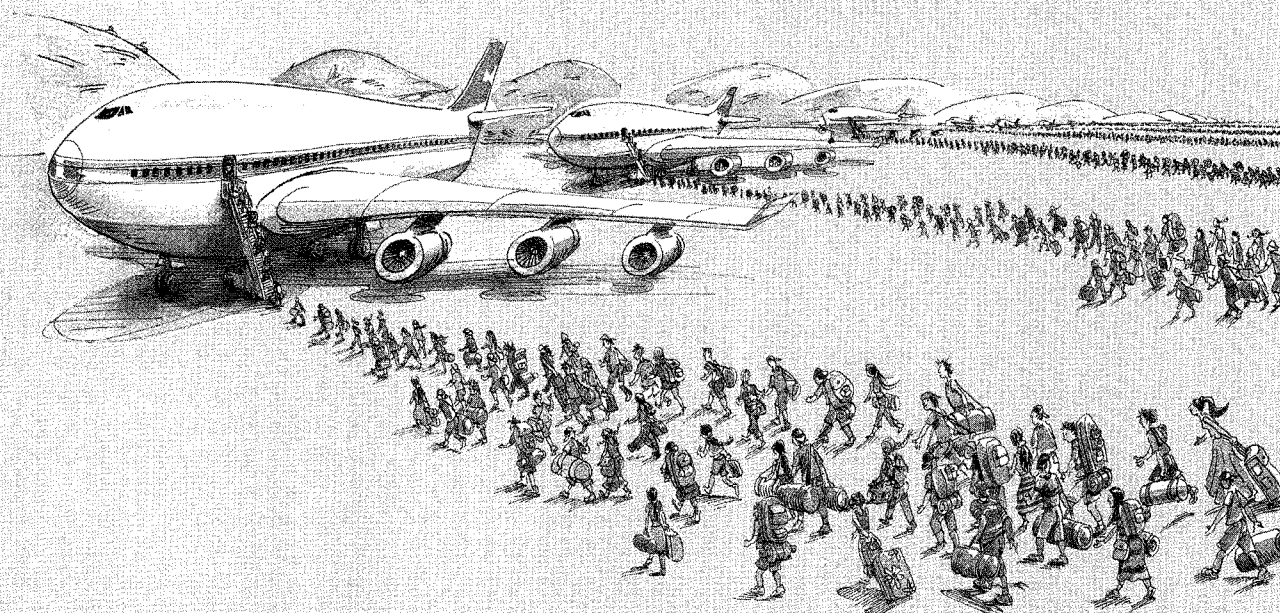
The causes that animated the Mugwumps are tinged with sepia. But the demand those reformers articulated should resonate as loudly today as ever it did: it is the demand for a politics based on realities, not phantoms. ■

David Frum, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, is the author of *Comeback: Conservatism That Can Win Again*.

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What Would Wilson Do?

As the president wrestles with policy decisions about Afghanistan, Iran, and elsewhere, pundits try to pigeonhole him: Is he a realist or an idealist? But the best American foreign policy has always been both, mixing moral aspiration with unsentimental prudence. Obama's most useful model may be a predecessor who was a realist wrongly pegged as an idealist—Woodrow Wilson.

By DAVID M. KENNEDY

TO THE DELIGHT of late-night television comedians, President George H. W. Bush used to talk incessantly about “prudence,” but in fact the term is a deadly serious watchword for the “realist” school of foreign policy. It was on realist grounds that the elder Bush refused to press on to Baghdad after defeating the Iraqi army in the Gulf War in 1991. However alluring the goal, he said, pursuing it “would have incurred incalculable human and political costs”; he was expressing the kind of unsentimental caution that is realism’s most important characteristic. In contrast, his son, George W. Bush, was arguably among the most idealistic of American presidents. The younger Bush believed that there is but a “single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise”—the kind of universalizing ideological claim that idealists have traditionally embraced. On those grounds, he set out to sweep into Baghdad, depose Saddam Hussein, and compel Iraq to embrace that unique model—an instance of unchecked idealism whose full consequences remain to be seen. President Barack Obama must now strike his own balance between the claims of realism and idealism. But are these ways of thinking about foreign policy as incompatible as they seem?

AFTER THE PEACE of Westphalia ended Europe’s religious wars in 1648, the principle of sovereignty came to dominate the theory and practice of

international relations. Sovereignty was trumps. States had no right to intervene in the internal affairs of other states. Yet no “higher authority,” papal, Protestant, or otherwise, stood above them. Only the ceaseless exercise of power, especially by the weighty “great powers,” might hold contentious states in tenuous equilibrium.

That concept was eventually accepted as the foundation of the international system, forming the bedrock on which the foreign-policy school of realism has ever after rested its case.

Realism also has roots in antiquity, as famously recorded in Thucydides’ account of the invading Athenians’ diktat to the hapless inhabitants of Melos during the Peloponnesian War, in 416 B.C. The Athenians dismissed the Melians’ appeals to morality and justice with the chill calculus of might: “The strong do what they will and the weak suffer what they must.” If one sentence could be said to comprise a Realist Manifesto, that would be it. Realism insists that moral considerations and reveries about “international law” or permanent peace are not only utopian but dangerous. *Raison d’état*, or the national interest, is the sole standard that should guide any sovereign state’s external relations.

When Britain’s North American colonies struck for their independence in 1776, they simultaneously invoked and defied Westphalian principles. In the process, they introduced a new concept—“idealism”—into the lexicon of international politics.

The Declaration of Independence sounded a Westphalian note when it pronounced the Americans to be “one people” claiming their “separate and equal station” as a sovereign state. Yet at the same time, the American revolutionaries challenged inherited notions of sovereignty when they asserted that only certain kinds of states could be regarded as fully legitimate.

Thomas Paine’s 1776 pamphlet, *Common Sense*, is credited with convincing the American colonists that their cause was independence, rather than reconciliation with Britain—mainly because without independence they could not hope for foreign assistance. But we’d do well to remember that Paine opened his tract with a treatise on government. He eloquently anticipated the declaration’s claim that only republican states deriving “their just powers from the consent of the governed” were rightfully constituted. He then laid out the case for the kind of foreign policy that would secure the American republic—and suggested that a world composed of republics might be markedly more peaceful than the world of monarchies and empires that the Americans were repudiating. *Common Sense* was both the inspiration for American nationhood and the founding charter for American foreign policy.

From its birth, the United States thus infused its diplomacy with a revolutionary ideology that looked to the creation of a *novus ordo seclorum* in the international sphere as well as the domestic. That ideology constitutes the



core of the idealist tradition in foreign policy. It is value-driven, morally infused, and devoted to concepts of international law and lasting peace. From its inception, idealism melded with an inherited sense of America's providential mission to redeem the world. It also fitted easily with America's emerging culture of mass democracy, and adumbrated some conspicuous facts about all popularly elected governments thereafter: that democratically accountable leaders must justify their foreign policies on grounds that the mass of citizens will accept—and that self-interest alone often appears inadequate to that end. In democracies, history attests, a measure of idealism may be necessary if a state is to sustain a coherent foreign policy.

Idealism was a prudential policy for an infant republic that could no more plausibly wield conventional power against the colossus of imperial Britain than Melos could against Athens. In that sense, idealism's appeal to transcendent standards of justice was arguably what made it America's most realistic policy in the nation's early days. What's remarkable is the degree to which the United States continued to honor those idealist precepts well after it ascended to great-power status.

Yet American diplomacy has proved most successful when it has tempered its idealistic aspirations with that canonical realist precept: the importance of limits. Balancing ambition with feasibility, ideational goals with material costs, has been perhaps the highest realist doctrine. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams gave it classic formulation in a Fourth of July address in 1821:

What has America done for the benefit of mankind? Let our answer be this ... wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy ... She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own ... she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom.

In Adams's day, the United States had limited capacity indeed to export its ideals. But in time, when its influence would reach to the farthest corners of the planet, how would the United States pursue its transformative agenda?

Throughout the 19th century, the United States remained a peripheral country preoccupied with subduing the North American continent. Jacked by two oceans, with no neighbors to fear, it enjoyed a degree of security that few states have ever known. In the Old World chanceries where the great game of geopolitics was played, the United States mattered little. As late as 1890, the U.S. Army ranked 14th in size, after Bulgaria's. In 1900, the Department of State counted a mere 91 employees in Washington. These were not the attributes of even a middling power. America's ambition to transform the international order hovered beyond the horizon of some indefinite tomorrow.

But as the 20th century dawned, the United States was no longer so easy to ignore. It had grown to be the most populous country in the Western world, save Russia. It was the leading producer of wheat, coal, iron, steel, and electricity. It would soon command the world's largest pool of investment capital. The Spanish-American War in 1898 and the subsequent annexation of Puerto Rico and the Philippine Islands dramatically announced that the United States had acquired the means to project its power well beyond its home continent.

That America now wielded immense *potential* strength to work its will in the world was evident. But when, if ever, and how, if at all, would that potential be realized? And what, exactly, was America's will? Those questions excited an intense discussion in the 20th century's opening decades, one with resonant echoes in our own time.

Anti-imperialists like Mark Twain advocated a return to isolationism. Unapologetic realists like Theodore Roosevelt urged the country to start behaving like a conventional great power, pursuing worldwide interests commensurate with its capacities. But Woodrow Wilson, whose ideas would eventually triumph, did not want his country to become just another great power.

The ideals of the Founders illuminated Wilson's entire diplomatic program.

His proposals, he said, constituted "no breach in either our traditions or our policy as a nation, but a fulfillment, rather, of all that we have professed or striven for." When in 1919 he presented to the Senate the Versailles treaty, which included the Covenant of his beloved League of Nations, he declared: "It was of this that we dreamed at our birth." But like John Quincy Adams, Wilson understood the difference between ideological aspiration and historical possibility. Like Adams, he fitted his ideals to the circumstances he confronted.

Perhaps the most famous distillation of Wilson's thinking is to be found in his war address of April 2, 1917, when he said, "The world must be made safe for democracy." That maxim, and the entire scheme of "Wilsonianism" that it is thought to represent, have often been derided as hopelessly idealistic. The realist George F. Kennan excoriated Wilson for "the colossal conceit of thinking that you could suddenly make international life over into what you believed to be your own image."

That is a formidable criticism, but it is as misdirected at Wilson as it would have been at the Founders. Properly understood, Wilson's simple declarative sentence—"The world must be made safe for democracy"—constituted a realistic as well as an idealistic lodestar for American foreign policy. It guided American diplomacy in the season of its greatest success, the half century following World War II. Wilson, maligned as a dewy-eyed idealist, should instead be celebrated as the original architect of America's most realistic—and successful—foreign policies.

More clearly than his critics, Wilson recognized that the world now bristled with dangers that no single state could contain, even as it shimmered with prospects that could be seized only by states acting together—that it presented threats incubated by emerging technologies, and opportunities generated by the gathering momentum of the Industrial Revolution. Making such a world safe for democracy required more than the comforting counsels of isolation, and more than taking the inherited international order as a given and conducting the business of great-power diplomacy as usual. It required, rather, active engagement with other

states to muzzle the dogs of war, suppress weapons of mass destruction, and improve both standards of living and international comity through economic liberalization. Most urgently, it required new institutions that would import into the international arena at least a modicum of the trust, habits of reciprocity, and rule of law that obtained in well-ordered national polities. These were ambitious goals, but they were also realizable, as time would tell.

At the heart of Wilson's program lay the League of Nations. Yet for all the league's apparent novelty, in Wilson's view it honored a Westphalian objective: "affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike." The league is best understood not as a revolutionary menace to the Westphalian system, but as an evolutionary adaptation of venerable practices to modern circumstances. Respect for sovereignty was its essence. Only "fully self-governing"—that is, sovereign—states, dominions, or colonies were eligible for membership. Most actions required unanimous consent. Lacking an armed force, the league depended on its member states, especially the great powers, for enforcement of its provisions.

Nor did Wilson propose a wholesale cession of American sovereignty to the new body. He was offering a kind of grand bargain: the United States would abjure its historic isolationism and agree to play an engaged international role—but only if the rules of the international system were altered in accordance with American goals, putting the world on a pathway to more international cooperation and better international behavior.

The ironic result is well known. Wilsonianism was stillborn at the end of World War I, with consequences that spawned the Great Depression and the Second World War. But when the United States emerged from that latter struggle, the story was dramatically different. Understanding the singular blend of idealism and realism that crystallized in that pivotal moment is essential to comprehending the success of the international post-World War II order—and the danger of forgetting its relevance to the 21st century.

AMERICA'S POWER at the end of World War II was exponentially greater than the power Wilson had wielded in 1918. The United States possessed the only intact large-scale advanced industrial economy on the globe. It held a monopoly, for the moment, on nuclear weapons. It boasted the world's largest navy and massive long-range strategic air capability. It commanded fully half the planet's manufacturing capacity. It held half of the world's gold stocks and foreign-currency reserves. It was the leading petroleum producer and a leading exporter.

A cohort of American leaders decided to use that power in ways that finally set in train the kind of transformation the Founders had dreamt of and Wilson had sought in vain, bringing about what the political scientist John Ikenberry has called "America's distinctive contribution to world politics."

For all its might and occasional bluster, the United States in the post-World War II era preferred not to rule with preemptive Olympian majesty. It became not a traditional imperial power, but a "hegemon." The word's Greek roots denote a guide, or a leader, and leadership has been well defined as a relationship between consenting adults, not an arrangement between a capricious master and sullen subordinates.

On the occasion of the first gathering of the United Nations, in San Francisco on April 25, 1945, President Harry S. Truman used words that could have been Wilson's—or Paine's: "The responsibility of great states is to serve and not to dominate the peoples of the world." And although the United States undeniably continued to pursue what Wilson once scorned as its own "aggrandizement and material benefit" (considerations never absent from American foreign policy, nor should they be), what is most remarkable is the way Washington created what the Norwegian scholar Geir Lundestad has called an "empire by invitation."

At its best, that unconventional "empire" paid deference to the norms

of Westphalian sovereignty even while artfully modifying them. Washington did not compel subordination from other states, but rather provided incentives for willing participation. The empire's architects understood the realist wisdom that, as Robert Kagan has written, "Predominance is not the same thing as omnipotence." They appreciated that this was the moment to use America's unrivaled power to shape an order that would, among other things, provide a hedge against the inevitable moment when America's power was less. It was as if the Athenians had taken the Melians' plea to heart: that it is in the interest of all, the strong as well as the weak, to recognize and obey stipulated rules of international behavior—not least because today's strong states can become tomorrow's weak ones. (The Athenians, who eventually lost the Peloponnesian War, had ample opportunity to reconsider the lesson of Melos.)

The Americans of that era helped to erect an array of multilateral institutions, including the United Nations, the

International Monetary Fund, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (or World Bank), and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which would later evolve into the World Trade Organization. Membership in those institutions was generally open to all, excepting nations

in the Communist bloc. Participating states ceded only marginal elements of their sovereignty. The United Nations in particular, held in check by the veto power of each permanent member of the Security Council, could not plausibly be described as a supranational world government. But taken together, these innovative institutions brought a measure of law and reciprocity to international politics.

The framework provided by this international regime began subtly, incrementally, to fulfill the Founders' promise of a new world order, one that nurtured new norms of interstate behavior. The Marshall Plan, announced in 1947, catalyzed the process

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that eventually yielded the European Union. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, formed in 1949, provided the security guarantees for Western Europe throughout the Cold War that made the maturation of the EU possible. The Nuremberg and Tokyo war-crimes trials, along with the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, established at least a minimal basis in international law for superseding sovereignty in the face of egregious crimes against humanity—though those precedents proved feeble against the likes of Pol Pot, Slobodan Milošević, and the predators of Rwanda and Darfur. Less palpably but no less importantly, that web of multilateral structures bred some measure of trust among sovereign states that had eyed each other warily at least since Westphalia.

Whatever their limitations, for nearly three generations those institutions constituted the major pillars supporting a global economic expansion of unprecedented reach. They also underwrote the advance of self-determination and democracy, as the colonial powers withdrew from Africa and Asia, the Soviet empire disintegrated, and open elections became the norm in countries that had not seen them in generations, if ever. No *grand guerre* erupted on anything remotely approximating the scale of the two world wars. The European continent was pacified after centuries of conflict—itsself an accomplishment sufficient to distinguish the age. In this same era, Americans enjoyed economic prosperity and personal security unmatched even in the country's singularly fortunate history. As international regimes go, the post-World War II era, despite the chronic tensions and occasional blunders of the Cold War and especially the tragedy of Vietnam, was on the whole a felicitous season in the world's sorry history.

Most of those multilateral structures are now more than 50 years old. Many, probably all, need substantial reform. And even this impressive matrix of institutions may be ill-suited to the tasks of extinguishing radical Islamist terrorism and adapting to climate change. But international institutions well matched to the dawning century can rise only

from the foundations of mutual trust that a half century of multilateral life cemented—and that the policies of the past several years have shaken.

Here is where the full meaning of Wilson's call, "The world must be made safe for democracy," becomes clear and compelling. Wilson tempered his diplomatic ideals with a pragmatic comprehension of the modern world, of its possibilities and its dangers. He respected the pride and the prerogatives of other peoples. He shrewdly calculated the reach as well as the limits of American power. Perhaps most important, he was attentive to what kind of foreign policy, resting on principles of moral legitimacy, the American public would embrace.

Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman took the lessons. They asked only that the world be made safe for democracy, not that the world be made democratic. They understood the complexities of human cussedness and the constraints on even America's formidable power. They would surely have hesitated to wage a preemptive war against Iraq that grossly overestimated America's capacity to achieve its goals.

THE DAMAGE DONE by this distortion of the Wilsonian legacy has yet to be fully calculated. Future historians will take its measure not only in the worldwide surge of anti-American sentiment, but also in the erosion of confidence in the multinational institutions—including NATO, the UN, the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO—that the United States itself had so painstakingly nurtured across decades.

In an age awakening to the global dimensions of environmental degradation, the fungibility of employment across national frontiers, massive international migrant flows, the unprecedented scale of international capital transactions, the contagious volatility of financial markets, and the planetary menace of nuclear proliferation—not to mention the threat of terrorism—that erosion of confidence threatens to deny the world the very tools it needs most to manage the ever more interdependent global order of the 21st century. It would be folly to abandon those tools, or to let them rust through inattention, particularly as new great powers arise

to rival the last century's hegemon. To do so would leave all nations, including the United States, markedly less secure. It would make a mockery of realism's admonition to see the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. And it would dishonor more than two centuries of America's unique tradition of interweaving idealistic and realistic principles in pursuit of a *novus ordo seclorum*.

The keys to American foreign policy in the post-WWII years were four: grounding policy in well-articulated, easily comprehended American values that recruited and sustained domestic support; honoring inherited notions of sovereignty and the rights of other states; seeking multilateral cooperation where possible and acting unilaterally only in extremis; and remembering that even America's enormous power was finite and fluid, and should therefore be deployed to shape a world in which all states, not only the momentarily strong, had a stake. Taken together, those principles constitute a blend of realism and idealism, not a stark choice between them, and their careful application over several decades represents a singular achievement for American diplomacy. When they have not been followed, United States foreign policy has failed, sometimes catastrophically, as in Vietnam and Iraq. But when those principles have informed policy, they have achieved salutary results and, not incidentally, bolstered the nation's moral stature in the world. In his approach to conundrums like Iran's nuclear program and securing Afghanistan, President Obama has shown that he understands the imperative to restore America to the footing of principled realism that has undergirded its most successful foreign policies. It is far too soon to judge the depth of his commitment to this long-term project, much less whether he will succeed. Perhaps receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize will strengthen his resolve. Surely its award testifies to the fact that the world shares with many Americans the hope that the United States might continue to champion the diplomatic principles that have served it so well since its birth. ■

David M. Kennedy, a professor of history at Stanford University, is working on a book about the historical determinants of the American national character.



Governing in the Age of Fox News

The polarization of the American media has deep historical roots—the republic came into being amidst a vigorous partisan press. But the splintering of public attention and the intensification of ideological journalism—in particular, the rise of Fox News—have created unique challenges for President Obama. Is it possible to have partisan media that retain professional standards of reporting?

By PAUL STARR

THE FIGHT BETWEEN the Obama White House and Fox News may look like a replay of previous presidential conflicts with the media. After all, antagonism between presidents and elements of the press is a fine American tradition.

But the Fox News phenomenon is different, and its development reflects a deeper change in the public itself that presents a new challenge for presidential leadership.

What was once an expansive mass public has lost some of its old breadth and, at its core, become more intense

and combative. A growing percentage of people, especially among the young, no longer regularly follow the news in any medium, while those who remain the most attentive and engaged tend to be sharply polarized along ideological lines. On both ends of the political spectrum, people interested in politics

increasingly view national leadership through the prism of the partisan media that dominate cable news, talk radio, and the blogosphere.

Before cable and the Internet, the way for a president to reach the national public was through national media that sought to appeal to audiences spanning the partisan divide. The major newspapers, wire services, and broadcast networks controlled the flow of news from Washington and the president's access to the channels of persuasion, yet they operated more or less according to the standards of professional journalism, and the White House could exercise plenty of leverage in its media relations by selectively leaking news and granting exclusive interviews. So despite sometimes antagonistic relations with the press, presidents were able to use it to reach a broad and relatively coherent national public.

But now that the old behemoths of the news are in decline, the unified public they assembled is fading too. Neither the broadcast networks nor the newspapers have the reach they once did, raising concerns about whether the press will be able to serve its classic function as a watchdog over government. That problem also has a flip side. Precisely because the press is often critical of political leaders, it provides them legitimacy when it validates the grounds for their decisions. A press that is widely trusted by the public for its independence and integrity is also a resource for building consensus. Thus when the public sorts itself according to hostile, ideologically separate media—when the world of Walter Cronkite gives way to the world of Glenn Beck and Keith Olbermann—political leadership loses a consensus-building partner. This is the problem that faces Barack Obama. It is not, however, an unprecedented one.

TO MOST AMERICANS, at least until recently, it had long seemed a settled matter that the media should have no relationship with political parties—but that has not been the norm throughout American history, much less in other countries. In many democracies, newspapers and other media have developed in parallel with political parties (sometimes directly financed and

controlled by them), while elsewhere the media have been independent, with no partisan connection. The prevailing model for how American presidents interact with the media has gone through three historical stages. As a young republic (and to a large extent even after the Civil War), the nation had partisan newspapers; the second stage, stretching across the 20th century, was characterized by powerful, independent media outlets that kept their distance from the parties; and in the third stage, we now have a hybrid system that combines elements of the first two.

The founding period in American history created a new and richly supportive environment for the press. Britain and other European states, seeing popular newspapers as a political threat, had limited what they could say and imposed heavy taxes to raise their costs and reduce their circulation. America's Founders, in contrast, believed that the circulation of news and political debate could help preserve their fragile republic. So besides guaranteeing the press its freedom, they excluded it from taxation and subsidized its development by setting cheap postal rates for mailing newspapers to subscribers. The government thereby underwrote the costs of a national news network without regulating its content. Public officials also subsidized specific newspapers they favored, by awarding generous contracts for government printing and paying fees for official notices. Together with subscription and advertising income, the postal and printing subsidies provided the financial basis for a development of the press so rapid that by 1835, the United States, even though it was still almost entirely rural, probably had the highest per capita newspaper circulation in the world.

Under many regimes, government subsidies have made the press politically subservient. But in the United

States, the postal subsidies benefited all newspapers without limitation based on viewpoint—and newspapers did clearly express their ideological stances. And because of the separation of powers and the federal system, printing subsidies from different branches and levels of government went to newspapers from different parties. In fact, rather than solidifying incumbent power, the early environment of the press paved the way for two insurgent presidential candidates, Thomas Jefferson in 1800 and Andrew Jackson in 1828.

Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans were the first party to exploit the press environment established by the Founders, and they did so despite adversity.

In 1798, during an undeclared war with France, President John Adams's Federalists enacted the infamous Sedition Act, making it a crime to publish "false, scandalous and malicious writing" about the president (though not about the vice president, who at the time was none other than Jefferson himself, the leader of the opposition). The Adams administration used the act to prosecute leading Jeffersonian editors and

close down their papers—but the Jeffersonians more than offset those losses by establishing dozens of new papers in the run-up to the election of 1800. In the process, they demonstrated that the press could serve as a lever for overturning power in the United States.

Political parties at this time were only loose coalitions of leaders; they had no ongoing organization except their newspapers, and in practice, the parties and their newspapers were almost indistinguishable. Local editors were key party organizers, and local party leaders often met in the newspaper office. According to some historians, this partisan press belonged to the "dark ages" of American journalism. But it played a central role in mobilizing political participation and creating a vibrant democracy. And at no time was that more the case than in 1828, when

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Jackson's supporters built a network of Democratic papers across the country, and voting turnout increased sharply.

Once in office, Jackson established the practice (which lasted until 1860) of having a quasi-official paper that spoke directly for the president and received federal patronage. Still, the press continued to be highly competitive, and the presidential newspaper did not become a stable monopoly. In the 32 years following Jackson's election, 11 different papers in Washington served as presidential organs, and by the 1860s they were so outstripped in circulation by advertising-supported metropolitan dailies that a separate paper representing the president had become obsolete. Beginning with Lincoln, presidents communicated with the public through commercially financed newspapers, though many of these continued to have strong partisan identities.

The rise of the mass press inaugurated a long, second era in presidential communication, spanning most of the 20th century, when national leaders had to adapt to new realities, including the growing role of reporters as independent interpreters of the news and the development of media with national reach. In the late 19th century, presidents literally kept journalists at a distance (reporters had to wait outside the White House gates for news from officials coming and going). Presidents also did not represent themselves, nor were they seen, as the central actors in the nation's politics. Only at the turn of the century, as "congressional government" gave way to a stronger executive, did presidents begin to cultivate the press and make themselves more visible by seizing the opportunities for public persuasion and influence that mass communications provided.

If Jefferson and Jackson were the two breakthrough presidents in the era of the partisan press, the two Roosevelts were their counterparts

as presidential innovators in the mass media of the 20th century. Although the shift began under his predecessor, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt brought reporters into the White House on a more regular basis, providing them for the first time with a press room. He also projected his influence more widely, giving more speeches than earlier presidents had and making the most of his office as a "bully pulpit." With his charm and energy, Roosevelt infused the presidency with qualities that have served as a model for leadership through the media ever since.

Natural gifts were also critical to Franklin Roosevelt's success. The first Roosevelt, a Republican, had had the advantage of dealing with a press that was predominantly Republican in its sympathies. FDR, however, as a Democrat, was convinced that he needed to circumvent hostile Republican newspaper publishers to reach the public directly. Radio gave him that power. Unlike Herbert Hoover, Roosevelt spoke in a conversational style in his "fireside chats," creating the sense

among his listeners that he was talking directly to them in their living rooms.

The advent of television highlighted the personality and performative abilities of the president even more than had radio. What the fireside chat was for FDR, the televised news conference was for John F. Kennedy—an opportunity to show off personal qualities to maximum advantage. In the era of the captive mass public, from the 1950s through the '70s—when people had access to only a few TV channels, and the three national networks had a 90 percent share of the audience—the president had command of the airwaves, and the narrative of the evening news typically cast him as the dominant actor in the nation's daily political drama.

For a time, this seemed to be the permanent structure of the news and national politics in the age of electronic

media. In retrospect, it was the peaking of the unified national public, the moment just before cable TV and the Internet began breaking it up, bringing the media to another historic turning point.

FROM THE FOUNDING ERA to the late 20th century, the news in America enjoyed an expanding public. In the 1800s, postal policies and advances in printing technology cut the price of the printed word and, together with wider access to education, enabled more Americans to read newspapers and become civically literate. In the 20th century, radio, newsreels at the movies, and television extended the reach of the news even farther.

It was only reasonable to assume, then, that the digital revolution would repeat the same pattern, and in some respects it has; online news is plentiful and (mostly) free. But a basic rule of communication is that abundance brings scarcity: an abundance of media creates a scarcity of attention. So although journalists and politicians have new ways to reach the public, the public has acquired even more ways to ignore them. Politics and other news are at our fingertips, but a lot of us don't want to go there. Between 1998 and 2008, according to surveys by the Pew Research Center, the number of Americans who say they don't get the news in any medium on an average day rose from 14 percent to 19 percent—and from 25 percent to 34 percent among 18-to-24-year-olds. And 2008 was a year when interest in the news should have been relatively high.

Obama's success in using digital media during the election may have led some to expect that as president he would be able to do the same. The job, however, is different. Rallying your activist base may not be the best way to win marginal votes in Congress. What Obama needs to do to win those votes—for example, make concessions to moderate Democrats on health-care legislation—may, in fact, disappoint his most passionate supporters. Mobilizing public support as president, rather than as a candidate, is also a different challenge. Although digital communications have made reaching political supporters cheaper and easier, the fractured nature

**America's
Founders
believed that
the circulation
of news
and political
debate could
help preserve
their fragile
republic.**

of the public makes it more difficult to reach both the less politically interested and the partisan opposition.

During what the political scientists Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell refer to as the “golden age of presidential television” in the early postwar decades, close to half the households in the country would watch a prime-time presidential TV appearance. As access to cable expanded in the 1980s, the audience started shrinking, and by 1995, only 6.5 percent of households watched one of Bill Clinton’s news conferences. Obama started out with comparatively high ratings. According to Nielsen data, 31 percent of TV homes watched his first press conference, on February 9, though that dropped to 16 percent by his fifth, on July 22. His speeches to Congress have drawn a somewhat bigger audience, but the ratings have followed the same trajectory. Nonetheless, the president still has the ability to command wider attention than any other figure in American politics. Obama’s health-care speech to Congress on September 9 drew an estimated 32 million viewers, which was down from 52 million for his first address to Congress in February but still far higher than any other political figure could hope to attract.

After a summer when the national debate on health-care reform seemed to be dominated by his opponents—thanks, in no small measure, to Fox News and its one-sided coverage of protests at congressional representatives’ town-hall meetings—Obama was able to reverse the momentum. In any conflict, the president’s voice can rise above the noise. In any national crisis, eyes will still turn to the president, and citizens will expect him to speak for the nation. On those occasions, if he uses the opportunity well, he remains the country’s most important teacher. And that remains Obama’s greatest strength in competing with Fox over the direction of the national conversation.

During his presidential campaign, Obama said he would try to repair America’s bitter divisions, and he reached out to conservatives on various occasions, such as his visit to Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church. American politics has become more polarized, however, for deep-seated historical

reasons. With the shift of the South to the GOP, the Republicans have become a more purely conservative party, and the Democrats a more liberal one. If this change in the parties had occurred half a century ago, the dominant news media might have moderated polarizing tendencies because of their interest in appealing to a mass audience that crossed ideological lines. But the incentives have changed: on cable, talk radio, and the Internet, partisanship pays.

Not since the 19th century have presidents had to deal with partisan media of this kind, and even that comparison is imperfect. Today the media saturate everyday life far more fully than they did in early American history. Fox News, in particular, is in a league by itself. In the absence of clear national leadership in the Republican Party, Fox’s commentators (together with Rush Limbaugh) have effectively taken over that role themselves. Although they have their liberal counterparts on MSNBC, the situation is not exactly symmetrical, because MSNBC’s commentators do not have as strong a following and the network’s reporting is not as ideologically driven as Fox’s.

Of course, professional journalism, with its norms of detachment, hasn’t disappeared, though it’s in deep financial trouble. Leading newspapers, notably *The New York Times*, have a wider readership online and in print than they had before in print alone. Media-criticism blogs and Web sites from varied perspectives serve a policing function in the new world of public controversy. Partisan media are now firmly part of our national conversation, but countervailing forces—not just the political opposition and its supporters in the media, but professional journalists and other sources for authenticated facts—can keep partisanship from controlling that conversation. Although most American journalists assume that professionalism and partisanship are inherently incompatible, that is not necessarily so. Partisan media can, and in some countries do,

observe professional standards in their presentation of the news. That is where civic groups and the scientific community, as well as media critics and others upholding those standards, should focus their pressure. Some commentators may be beyond embarrassment, but the news divisions of the partisan media are likely to be more sensitive to charges of unsubstantiated claims and loaded language. The yellow press of the 1890s looked equally immune from

rebuttal—and for a long time it was—but the growth of professional journalism in the 20th century did bring about a significant degree of restraint, even in the tabloids.

No one can put the old public back together again. Walter Cronkite’s death last July provoked nostalgia for a time when it seemed all Americans had someone they could trust, and that person was a journal-

ist. But it’s not just Cronkite that’s gone; the world that made a Cronkite possible is dead. Now we have a fighting public sphere, which has some compensating virtues of its own. As in the early 19th century, a partisan press may be driving an increase in political involvement. After a long decline, voter turnout in the 2004 and 2008 elections returned to levels America hadn’t seen in 40 years. Fox News and MSNBC stir up the emotions not just of their devoted viewers but of those who abhor them; liberals and conservatives alike may be more inclined to vote as a result. Democracy needs passion, and partisanship provides it. Journalism needs passion, too, though the passion should be for the truth. If we can encourage some adherence to professional standards in the world of partisan journalism, not via the government but by criticism and force of example, this republic of ours—thankfully no longer fragile—may yet flourish. ■

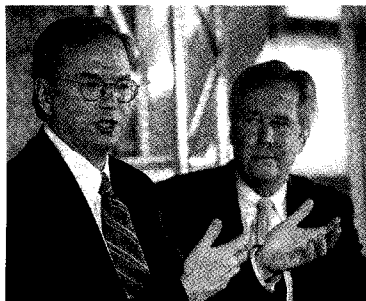
*Paul Starr is a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University and the author of, most recently, *The Creation of the Media and Freedom’s Power*.*

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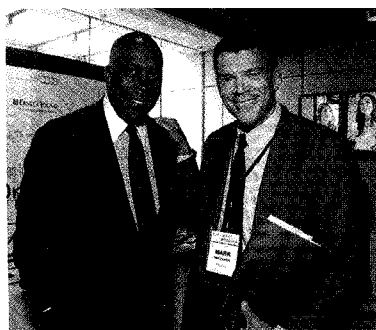
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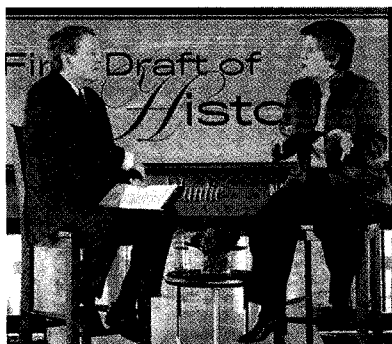
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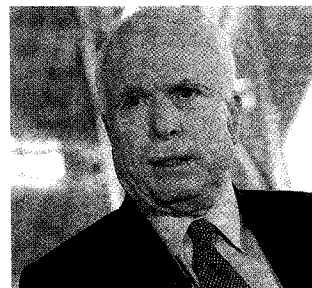
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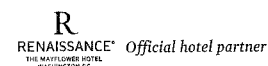
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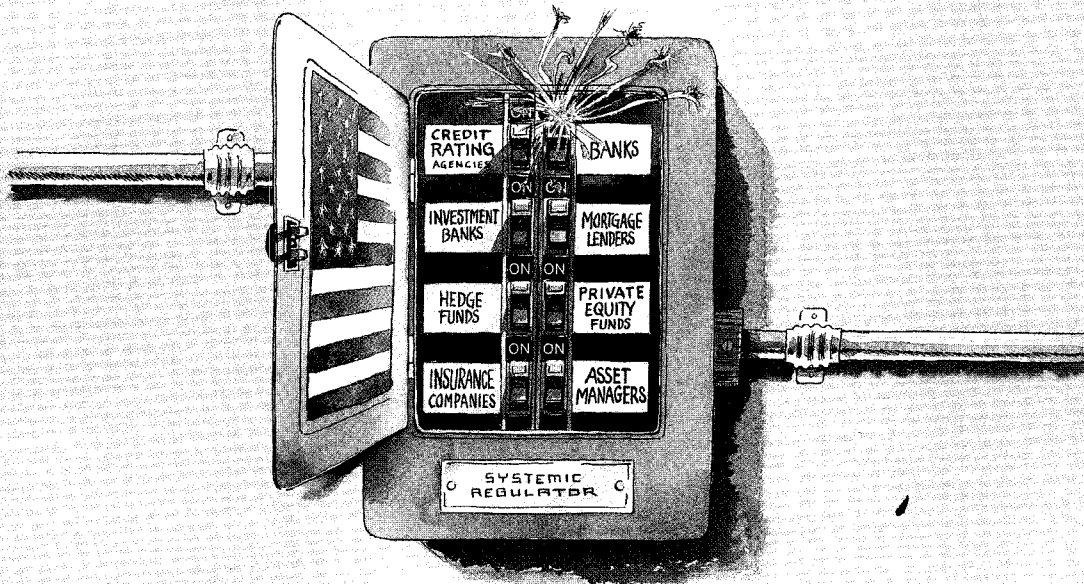
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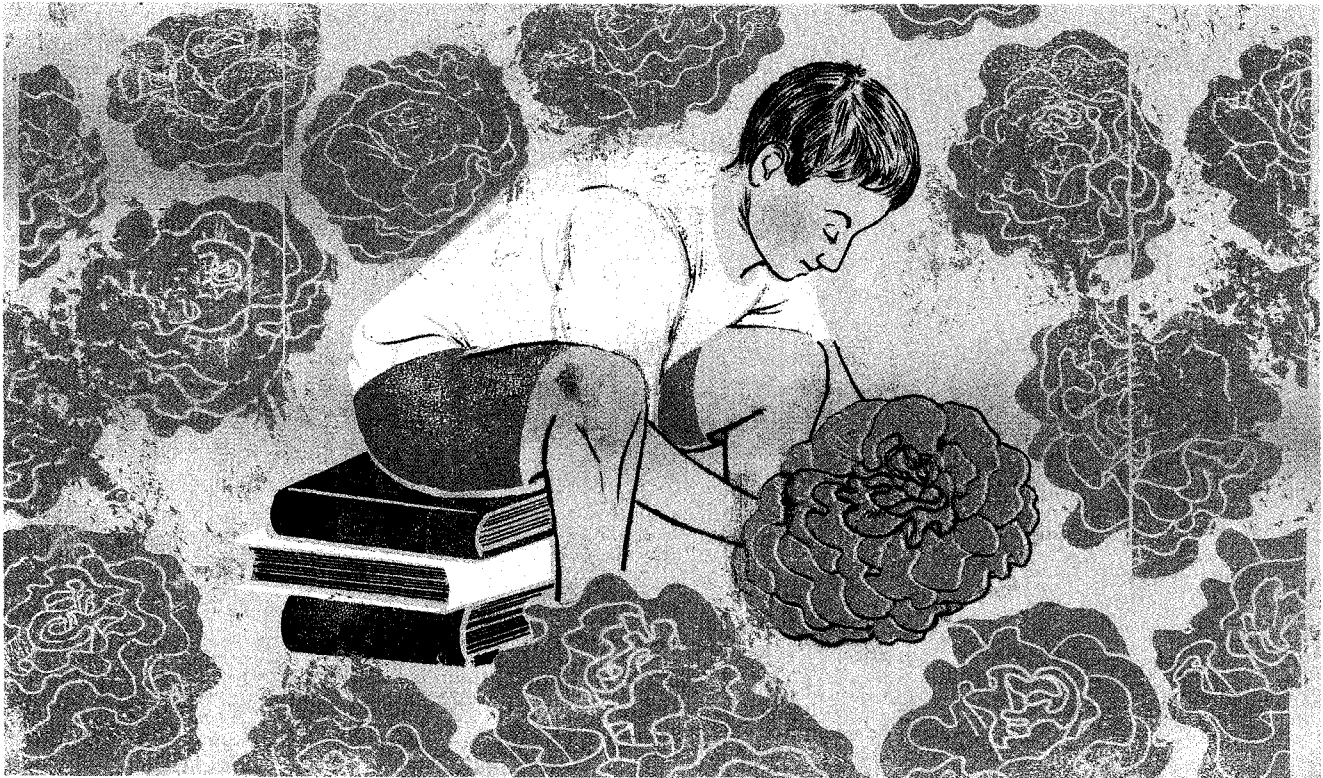
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BOOKS

ESSAY Caitlin Flanagan laments the rise of Alice Waters as educator.
REVIEW Christopher Hitchens surveys the apocalyptic splendor of J. G. Ballard.
COVER TO COVER American girls; Lorrie Moore's latest; and more



Cultivating Failure

HOW SCHOOL GARDENS ARE CHEATING OUR MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS

By Caitlin Flanagan

IMAGINE THAT AS a young and desperately poor Mexican man, you had made the dangerous and illegal journey to California to work in the fields with other migrants. There, you performed stoop labor, picking lettuce and bell peppers and table grapes; what made such an existence bearable was the dream of a better life. You met a woman and had a child with her, and because that child was born in the U.S., he was made a citizen of this great country. He will lead a life entirely different from yours; he will be educated. Now that child is about to begin middle school in the American

city whose name is synonymous with higher learning, as it is the home of one of the greatest universities in the world: Berkeley. On the first day of sixth grade, the boy walks through the imposing double doors of his new school, stows his backpack, and then heads out to the field, where he stoops under a hot sun and begins to pick lettuce.

It's rare for an immigrant experience to go the whole 360 in a single generation—one imagines the novel of assimilation, *The White Man Calls It Romaine*. The cruel trick has been pulled on this benighted child by an agglomeration of foodies and educational reformers

who are propelled by a vacuous if well-meaning ideology that is responsible for robbing an increasing number of American schoolchildren of hours they might otherwise have spent reading important books or learning higher math (attaining the cultural achievements, in other words, that have lifted uncounted generations of human beings out of the desperate daily scramble to wrest sustenance from dirt). The galvanizing force behind this ideology is Alice Waters, the dowager queen of the grown-locally movement. Her goal is that children might become “eco-gastronomes” and discover “how food

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grows"—a lesson, if ever there was one, that our farm worker's son might have learned at his father's knee—leaving the Emerson and Euclid to the professionals over at the schoolhouse. Waters's enormous celebrity, combined with her decision in the 1990s to expand her horizons into the field of public-school education, has helped thrust thousands of schoolchildren into the grip of a giant experiment, one that is predicated on a set of assumptions that are largely unproved, even unexamined. That no one is calling foul on this is only one manifestation of the way the new Food Hysteria has come to dominate and diminish our shared cultural life, and to make an educational reformer out of someone whose brilliant cookery and laudable goals may not be the best qualifications for designing academic curricula for the public schools.

WATERS, described by her biographer, Thomas McNamee, as "arguably the most famous restaurateur in the United States," is, of course, the founder of Chez Panisse, in Berkeley, an eatery where the right-on, "yes we can," ACORN-loving, public-option-supporting man or woman of the people can tuck into a nice table d'hôte menu of scallops, guinea hen, and tarte tatin for a modest 95 clams—wine, tax, and oppressively sanctimonious and relentlessly conversation-busting service not included. (I've had major surgeries in which I was less scrupulously informed about what was about to happen to me, what was happening to me, and what had just happened to me than I've been during a dinner there.) It was at Chez Panisse that Waters worked out her new American gastronomic credo, which is built on the concept of using ingredients that are "fresh, local, seasonal, and where possible organic." Fair enough, and perfectly delicious, but the scope of her operation—which is fueled not only by the skill of its founder, but also by the weird, almost erotic power she wields over a certain kind of educated, professional-class, middle-aged woman (the same kind of woman who tends to light, midway through life's

journey, on school voluntarism as a locus of her fathomless energies)—has widened so far beyond the simple cooking and serving of food that it can hardly be quantified. As McNamee rightly observes, Chez Panisse

is a much larger enterprise than a restaurant. It is a standard-bearer for a system of moral values. It is the leader of a style of cooking, of a social movement, and of a comprehensive philosophy of doing good and living well.

This notion—that it is agreeably possible to do good (school gardens!) and live well (guinea hens!)—bears the hallmark of contemporary progressivism, a kind of win-win, "let them eat tarte tatin" approach to the world and one's place in it that is prompting an improbable alliance of school reformers, volunteers, movie stars, politicians' wives, and agricultural concerns (the California Fertilizer Foundation is a big friend of school gardens) to insert its values into the schools.

The Edible Schoolyard program was born when Waters noticed a barren lot next to the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Berkeley. Inspired by the notion that a garden would afford students "experience-based learning that illustrates the pleasure of meaningful work, personal responsibility, the need for nutritious, sustainably raised, and

sensually stimulating food, and the important socializing effect of the ritual of the table," and spurred on by the school principal, Waters offered to build a garden and help create a curriculum to go along with it.

An Aztec dance troupe performed on the day the first cover crop was planted (imagine it as a set piece for *The White Man Calls It Romaine*), and soon the exciting garden had made its

influence felt across the disciplines. In English class students composed recipes, in math they measured the garden beds, and in history they ground corn as a way of studying pre-Columbian civilizations. Students' grades quickly improved at King, which makes sense given that a recipe is much easier to

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF STANDARDS: LINKING SCHOOL GARDENS TO CALIFORNIA EDUCATION STANDARDS

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ALICE WATERS AND CHEZ PANISSE

By Thomas McNamee
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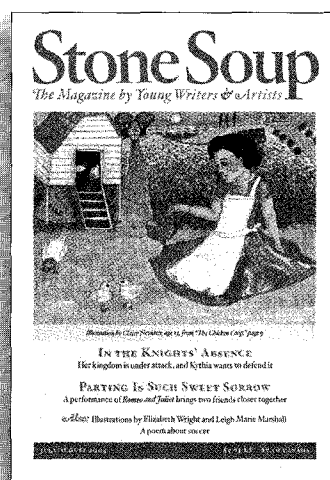
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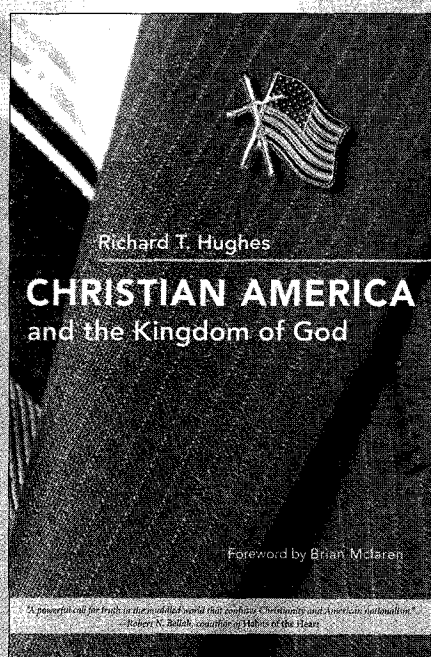
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write than a coherent paragraph on *The Crucible*.

Fads in education tend to take off quickly, but nothing else has come into our public schools at the rocket-blast rate of school gardens, particularly here in my home state of California. To be sure, this was hardly a new phenomenon in California, where school gardens waxed and waned over the years, propelled by the state's agricultural interests, the back-to-the-land movement of the '70s, and so on. But by the time Waters came onto the scene, organic food, nutrition, and sustainability were becoming the pet issues of the volunteering set. In the 1990s, Waters found a powerful ally in Delaine Eastin, the newly elected state superintendent of instruction (herself a "devoted gardener, home cook and recycler"), who called for "A Garden in Every School" the same year the Edible Schoolyard began.

Together, the bureaucrat and the celebrity paved the way for an enormous movement: by 2002, 2,000 of the state's 9,000 schools had a garden, and by 2008 that number had risen to 3,849, and it continues to grow. Waters, with her charisma and high political profile (which includes her friendship with the Clintons), has been hailed as one of the most important educational innovators not just in the state, but in the nation. In 1998, she received an Excellence in Education Award from Senator Barbara Boxer, as well as an Education Heroes Award from the U.S. Department of Education; the Smithsonian has sponsored an Edible Schoolyard exhibit on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Only four school gardens across the country bear the coveted Chez Panisse Foundation imprimatur (just two of them in California), but their influence has been profound. Not only has the foundation published a mind-numbingly earnest series of books on lesson planning, policy planning, and public policy, but it also has a teacher-training program and offers regular tours of the garden at King. In July, a *Los Angeles Times* article was titled "A New Crop of School Gardens: Even as State Funds Are Wilt-ing, Support for School Gardens Is Still Growing." Maria Shriver, the first lady of California, is a strong supporter and, like all the proponents of this kind of

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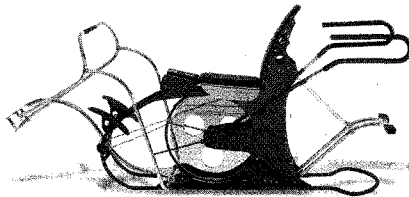


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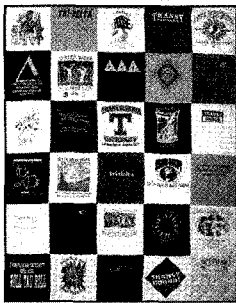


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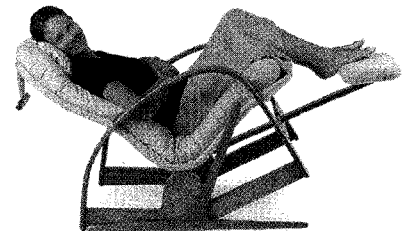
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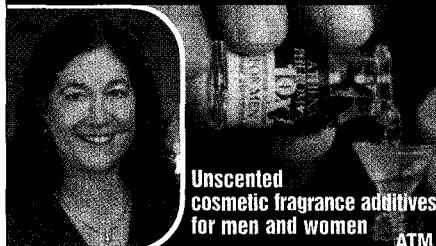
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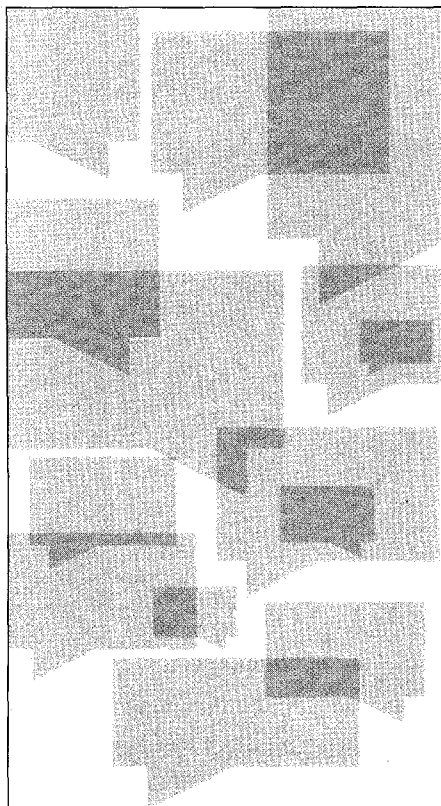
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education, she urges schools to use the gardens across all disciplines.

Of course, Waters herself is guilty of nothing more terrible than being a visionary and a woman of tremendous persuasive abilities. It's the state's Department of Education that is to blame for allowing these gardens to hijack the curricula of so many schools. But although garden-based curricula are advanced as a means of redressing a wide spectrum of poverty's ills, the animating spirit behind them is impossible to separate from the haute-bourgeois predilections of the Alice Waters fan club, as best expressed in one of her most oft-repeated philosophies: "Gardens help students to learn the pleasure of physical work." Does the immigrant farm worker dream that his child will learn to enjoy manual labor, or that his child will be freed from it? What is the goal of an education, of what we once called "book learning"? These are questions best left unasked when it comes to the gardens.

Hispanics constitute 49 percent of the students in California's public schools. Ever since the state adopted standards-based education (each child must learn a comprehensive set of skills and material) in 1997—coincidentally, at the same moment that garden learning was taking off—a notorious achievement gap has opened between Hispanic and African American students on the one hand, and whites and Asians on the other. Indeed, Hispanic students do particularly poorly at King Middle School. According to the 2009 Federal Accountability Requirements, statewide, more than 39 percent of Latinos are proficient in English and 44 percent in math, but at the King school, those numbers are a dismal 30 percent and 29 percent, respectively. Where do Berkeley's African American and Hispanic middle-schoolers do well? At a gardenless charter school called Cal Prep, where 92 percent of the students are black or Latino, where the focus is on academic achievement, and where test scores have been rising steadily.

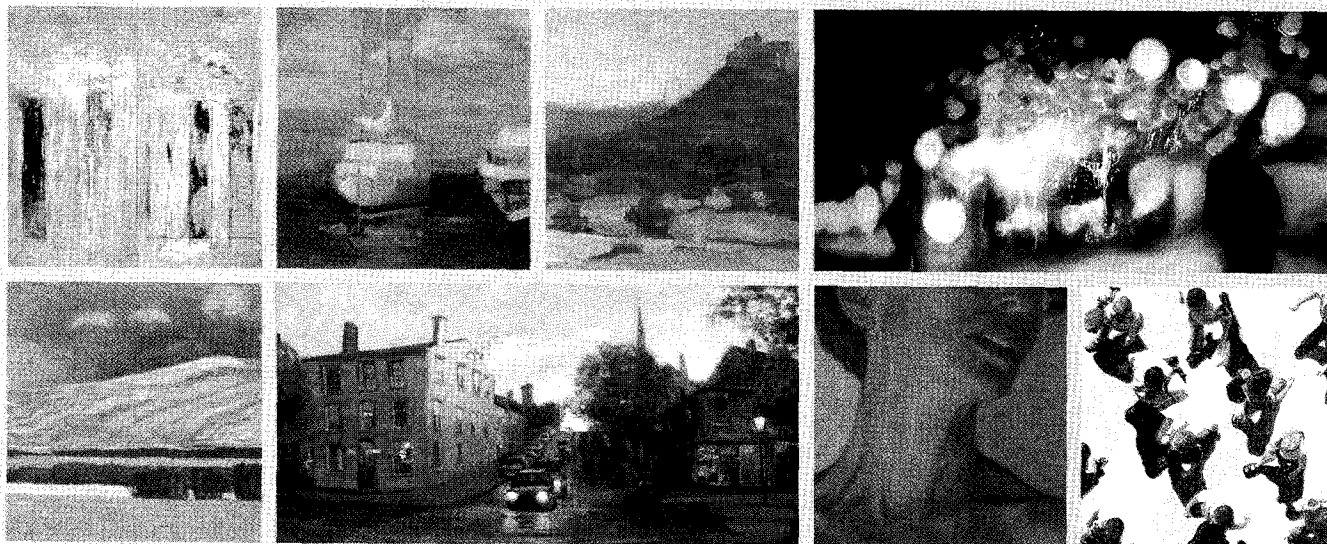
The garden-based curriculum has good news for the state's catastrophically underachieving students: a giant team of volunteers is ready to help them. Here is how our garden-loving, home-cooking, recycling superintendent of instruction describes one of

the program's principal advantages in the introduction to *A Child's Garden of Standards*, a gargantuan compendium of charts and lesson plans intended to link the beloved method of gardening with the hard-ass objectives of the state standards:

Some families, particularly those from other countries, may feel uncomfortable when asked to help out at school because their English skills or educational background do not give them a solid classroom footing. For these families, the living classroom of a garden can be a much more inviting environment in which to engage in their children's education.

If this patronizing agenda were promulgated in the Jim Crow South by a white man who was espousing a sharecropping curriculum for African American students, we would see it for what it is: a way of bestowing field work and low expectations on a giant population of students who might become troublesome if they actually got an education.

Here is the essential question we must ask about the school gardens: What evidence do we have that participation in one of these programs—so enthusiastically supported, so uncritically championed—improves a child's chances of doing well on the state tests that will determine his or her future (especially the all-important high-school exit exam) and passing Algebra I, which is becoming the make-or-break class for California high-school students? I have spent many hours poring over the endless research on the positive effects of garden curricula, and in all that time, I have yet to find a single study that suggests classroom gardens help students meet the state standards for English and math. Our kids are working in these gardens with the promise of a better chance at getting an education and a high-school diploma but without one bit of proof that their hard work will result in either. We should remember, by the way, that the California high-school exit exam, which so many are failing, is hardly onerous: it requires a mastery of eighth-grade math (students need to score a mere 55 percent on that portion of the test) and 10th-grade English language and composition (on which they need to score 60 percent or higher). And



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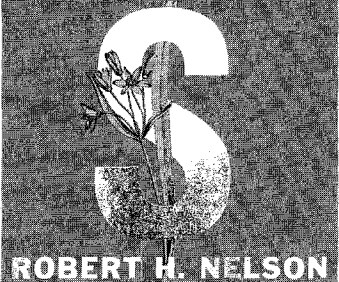
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so I would say this to our state's new child farm laborers: ¡Huelga! Strike!

The ever-evolving rationale behind the school-garden movement mashes together two emotionally stirring ideas: first, that kids will learn by doing, and second, that millions of poor kids have so little access to fruits and vegetables that if they don't spend their school day growing some on campus, they will never get any at all. As a pro-Waters friend observed to me in a recent e-mail, "There's only 7-Eleven in the hood."

As it happens, I live fewer than 20 miles from the most famous American hood, Compton, and on a recent Wednesday morning I drove over there to do a little grocery shopping. The Ralphs was vast, well-lit, bountifully stocked, and possessed of a huge and well-tended produce section. Using my Ralphs card, I bought four ears of corn for a dollar, green grapes and nectarines (both grown in the state, both 49 cents a pound), a pound of fresh tortillas for \$1.69, and a half gallon of low-fat milk for \$2.19. The staff, California friendly, outnumbered the customers, and the place had the dreamy, lost-in-time feeling that empty American supermarkets often have.

But across Compton Boulevard, it was a different story. Anyone who says that Americans have lost the desire and ability to cook fresh produce has never been to the Superior Super Warehouse in Compton. The produce section—packed with large families, most of them Hispanic—was like a dreamscape of strange and wonderful offerings: tomatillos, giant mangoes, cactus leaves, bunches of beets with their leaves on, chayote squash, red yams, yucca root. An entire string section of chiles: serrano, Anaheim, green, red, yellow. All of it was dirt cheap, as were the bulk beans and rice. Small children stood beside shopping carts with the complacent, slightly dazed look of kids whose mothers are taking care of business.

What we see at Superior Super Warehouse is an example of capitalism doing what it does best: locating a market need (in this case, poor people living in an American inner city who desire a wide variety of fruits and vegetables and who are willing to devote their time and money to acquiring them) and filling it.

But the existence of the monastically quiet Ralphs in Compton reflects something quite different: advocacy. Over the past decade, many well-intentioned factions have made a focused effort to bring supermarkets—and with them, abundant fresh produce—to poor urban areas. Although the battle is far from over, there has been some progress. This seems to me a more sensible approach to getting produce to children than asking the unfortunate tykes to spend precious school hours growing it themselves. Why not make them build the buses that will take them to and from school, or rotate in shifts through the boiler room?

THIS NOTION OF the school day as an interlude during which children can desperately attempt to cheat ignorance and death by growing the snap peas and zucchini flowers that are the essential building blocks of life comes with a lofty set of ideals. It is a grand vision, which Waters is happy to expand upon to any reporter who takes an interest, and it was described in the following way in last July's *Los Angeles Times*:

Waters says there is a shift in priorities that needs to happen within federal policy to give garden programs longevity. In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy implemented the President's Council on Physical Fitness to instill values of physical fitness. She considers the current prevalence of childhood obesity and early-onset Type 2 diabetes to be signals for immediate action similar to the fitness council.

Well, there's a leap of logic. Waters calls for a new federal program based on an old one, but the new one is necessary only because the old one has obviously failed: American kids are fatter and sicker than ever.

Why are obesity and Type 2 diabetes so closely related to low incomes in this country? Surely a good part of the answer lies in a heartrending truth about the experience of poverty that many conservatives (and not a few liberals) either don't know or choose not to know, and it is something I see at my volunteer job in a Los Angeles food bank, where the clients scoop as many candies out of the basket on my desk as

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I'll let them have (if I didn't set a limit, only the first person would get any) before glumly turning to the matter of filling out their food order form, which offers such basic and unexciting items as tuna, rice, and (yes) fresh fruits and vegetables, often including delicious oranges, pears, and peaches that people with fruit trees donate the day they're picked. The simple truth is expressed clearly by George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, his book about the grinding poverty experienced in the North of England in the 1930s:

The peculiar evil is this: that the less money you have, the less inclined you feel to spend it on wholesome food ... When you are unemployed, which is to say when you are underfed, harassed, bored, and miserable, you don't want to eat dull wholesome food. You want something a little bit "tasty." There is always some cheaply pleasant thing to tempt you. Let's have a three pennorth of chips! Run out and buy us a two-penny ice cream! Put the kettle on and we'll all have a nice cup of tea ... Unemployment is an endless misery that has got to be palliated.

The suicidal dietary choices of so many poor people are the result of a problem, not the problem itself. The solution lies in an education that will propel students into a higher economic class, where they will live better and therefore eat better.

I STARTED TO ASK Michael Piscal, founder and CEO of the Inner City Education Foundation Public Schools, which runs 15 successful charter schools in South Los Angeles, what he thought about the Edible Schoolyard and school gardens in general, but he cut me off. "I ignore all those e-mails," he told me bluntly. "Look," he said, when pressed, "there's nothing wrong with kids getting together after school and working on a garden; that's very nice. But when it becomes the center of everything—as it usually does—it's absurd. The only question in education reform that's worth anything is this: What are you doing to prepare these kids for college? If I can get a kid to read Shakespeare and laugh at the right places, I can get him to college. That's all that matters to me."

With the Edible Schoolyard, and the thousands of similar programs, the idea of a school as a venue in which to advance a social agenda has reached rock bottom. This kind of misuse of instructional time began in the Progressive Era, and it has been employed to cheat kids out of thousands of crucial learning hours over the years, so that they might be indoctrinated in whatever the fashionable idea of the moment or the school district might be. One year it's hygiene and another it's anti-Communism; in one city it's safe-sex "outer-course," and in another it's abstinence-only education. (Sixth-graders at King spend an hour and a half each week in the garden or the kitchen—and that doesn't include the time they spend in the classroom, in efforts effective or not, to apply the experiences of planting and cooking to learning the skills and subjects that the state of California mandates must be mastered.) But with these gardens—and their implication that one of the few important things we as a culture have to teach the next generation is what and how to eat—we're mocking one of our most ennobling American ideals. Our children don't get an education because they're lucky, or because we've generously decided to give them one as a special gift. Our children get an education—or should get an education—because they have a right to one. At the very least, shouldn't we ensure that the person who makes her mark on the curricula we teach be someone other than an extremely talented cook with a highly political agenda?

I have spent my life, it seems, in and around schools. For complicated reasons, I attended a score of them, both in the United States and abroad; I taught in Louisiana and Los Angeles for more than a decade; I have volunteered in all sorts of schools, and am now a mother of elementary-school students. I have never seen an entire school system as fundamentally broken and rudderless as the California public schools, a system in which one out of five high-school students drops out before graduation, and in which scarcely 60 percent of the African American and Hispanic students leave school with a diploma. These young people are cast adrift in a \$50 billion system in which failure is almost a foregone conclusion.

So why not give these troubled kids a bit of engagement and excitement out in the nourishing gardens, which if nothing else might slim them down and thus extend their lives? Really. How can that hurt?

Last October, we lost the greatest educational reformer of the late 20th century, TheodoreSizer, the founder of the Essential Schools movement, who was brave enough to say that when a school is in crisis, its leaders should strip away every program and resource that is not essential to the mission of schooling. He wrote in his classic 1984 book, *Horace's Compromise*:

If students have yet to meet the fundamental standards of literacy, numeracy and civic understanding, programs should focus exclusively on these. Some critics will argue that the school must go beyond these subjects to hold the interest of the pupils ... but a fourteen year old who is semiliterate is an adolescent in need of intensive, focused attention.

My state is full of semiliterate 14-year-olds. Let their after-school hours be filled with whatever enriching programs the good volunteers and philanthropic organizations of California care to offer them: club sports, choruses, creative-writing workshops, gardens. But until our kids have a decent chance at mastering the essential skills and knowledge that they will need to graduate from high school, we should devote every resource and every moment of their academic day to helping them realize that life-changing goal. Otherwise, we become complicit—through our best intentions—in an act of theft that will not only contribute to the creation of a permanent, uneducated underclass but will rob that group of the very force necessary to change its fate. The state, which failed these students as children and adolescents, will have to shoulder them in adulthood, for it will have created not a generation of gentleman farmers but one of intellectual sharecroppers, whose fortunes depend on the largesse or political whim of their educated peers. ■

Caitlin Flanagan is the author of *To Hell With All That* (2006). She is at work on *Girl Land*, a book about the emotional life of pubescent girls.

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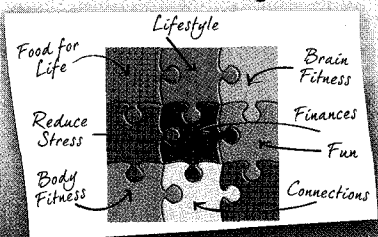
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The Catastrophist

THE HAUNTING SCIENCE FICTION OF J.G. BALLARD
By Christopher Hitchens

IN THE SPRING of 2006, at the Hay-on-Wye book festival, I was introduced at dinner to Sir Martin Rees, who is the professor of cosmology and astrophysics at Cambridge University and also holds the pleasingly archaic title of Astronomer Royal. He was to give a lecture that was later reprinted with the title "Dark Materials," in honor of the late professor Joseph Rotblat. In the course of this astonishing talk, he voiced the following thought:

"Most educated people are aware that we are the outcome of nearly 4 billion years of Darwinian selection, but many tend to think that humans are somehow the culmination. Our sun, however, is less than halfway through its lifespan. It will not be humans who watch the sun's demise, 6 billion years from now. Any creatures that then exist will be as different from us as we are from bacteria or amoebae."

Among the several questions that jostled for the uppermost in my mind was this: Where is the fiction that can rise to the level of this stupefying reality? (Only one novelist, Julian Barnes, was sufficiently struck to include Rees's passage in a book, but that was in his extended nonfiction memoir about death, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of*.) I quite soon came to realize that there was indeed a writer who could have heard

or read those words with equanimity, even satisfaction, and that this was J. G. Ballard.

For him, the possibility

of any mutation or metamorphosis was to be taken for granted, if not indeed welcomed, as was the contingency that, dead sun or no dead sun, the terrestrial globe could very readily be imagined after we're gone.

As one who has always disliked and distrusted so-called science fiction (the votaries of this cult disagreeing

pointlessly about whether to refer to it as "SF" or "sci-fi"), I was prepared to be unimpressed even after Kingsley Amis praised Ballard as "the most imaginative of H. G. Wells's successors." The natural universe is far too complex and frightening and impressive on its own to require the puerile add-ons of space aliens and super-weapons: the interplanetary genre made even C. S. Lewis write more falsely than he normally did. Hearing me drone on in this vein about 30 years ago, Amis fils (who contributes a highly lucid introduction to this collection)

wordlessly handed me *The Drowned World*, *The Day of Forever*, and, for a shift in pace and rhythm, *Crash*. Any one of these would have done the trick.

For all that, Ballard is arguably best-known to a wide audience because of his relatively "straight" novel, *Empire of the Sun*, and the resulting movie by Steven Spielberg. Some of his devotees

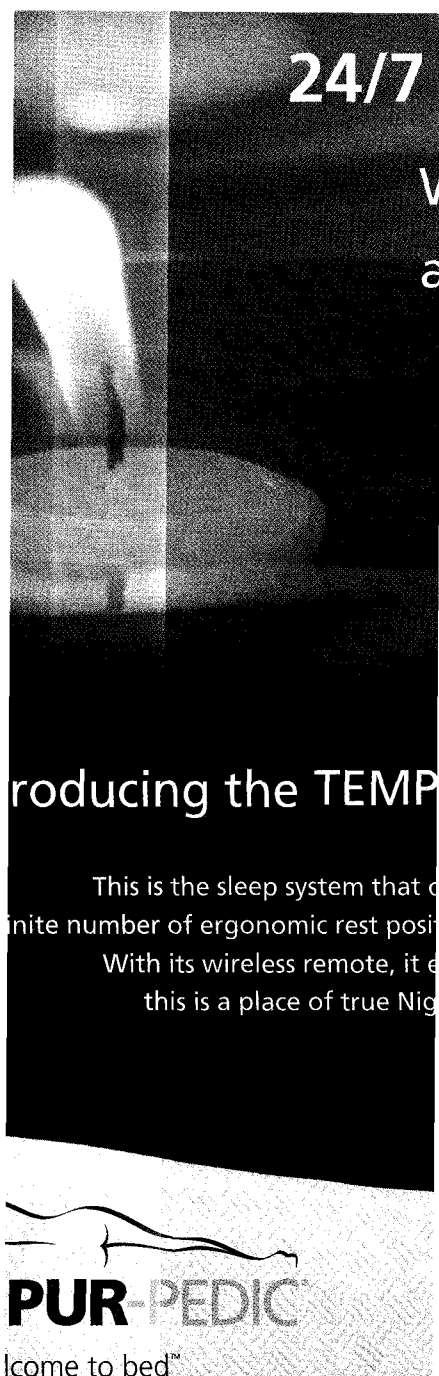


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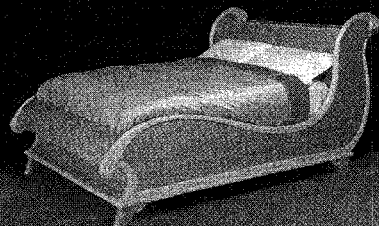
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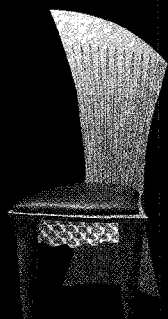
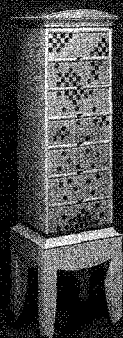
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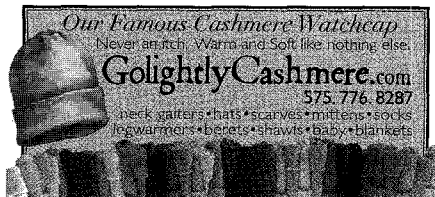
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were depressed by the literalness of the subject matter, which is a quasi-autobiographical account of being 13 years old and an inmate in a Japanese internment camp in Shanghai. It's not possible to read that book, however, and fail to see the germinal effect that experience had on Ballard the man. To see a once-thriving city reduced to beggary and emptiness, to live one day at a time in point of food and medicine, to see an old European order brutally and efficiently overturned, to notice the utterly casual way in which human life can be snuffed out, and to see war machines wheeling and diving in the overcast sky: such an education! Don't forget, either, that young Ballard was ecstatic at the news of the atomic obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an emotion that makes him practically unique among postwar literati. Included in this collection is a very strong 1977 story, "The Dead Time," a sort of curtain-raiser to *Empire*—Ballard's own preferred name for his book—in which a young man released from Japanese captivity drives a truckload of cadavers across a stricken landscape and ends up feeding a scrap of his own torn flesh to a ravenous child.

Readers of Ballard's memoir, *Miracles of Life* (a book with a slightly but not entirely misleading title) will soon enough discern that he built on his war-time Shanghai traumas in three related ways. As a teenager in post-war England he came across first Freud, and second the surrealists. He describes the two encounters as devastating in that they taught him what he already knew: religion is abject nonsense, human beings positively enjoy inflicting cruelty, and our species is prone to, and can coexist with, the most grotesque absurdities. What could have been more natural, then, than that Ballard the student should devote himself to classes in anatomy, spending quality time with corpses, some of whom, in life, had been dedicated professors in the department. An astonishing number of his

shorter works follow the inspiration of *Crash*, also filmed, this time by David Cronenberg, in morbid and almost loving accounts of "wound profiles," gashes, fractures, and other inflictions on the flesh and bones. Fascinated by the possibility of death in traffic, and rather riveted by the murder of John Kennedy, Ballard produced a themed series titled *The Atrocity Exhibition*, here partially collected, where collisions and ejaculations and celebrities are brought to-

gether in a vigorously stirred mix of Eros and Thanatos. His antic use of this never-failing formula got him briefly disowned by his American publisher and was claimed by Ballard as "pornographic science fiction," but if you can read "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered As a Downhill Motor Race" or "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan" in search of sexual gratification, you must

be jaded by disorders undreamed-of by this reviewer. Both stories, however, succeed in being deadpan funny.

Another early story (though not represented here: the claim of this volume to be "complete" is somewhat deceptive) in something of the same style, "Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy," ignited a ridiculous fuss in the very news rags whose ghoulish coverage of her life Ballard was intending to satirize. Randolph Churchill led the charge, demanding punishment for the tiny magazine that printed it. This "modest proposal" furnishes one of many clues to a spring of Ballard's inspiration, which is fairly obviously the work of Jonathan Swift. In 1964 he even wrote an ultra-macabre story, "The Drowned Giant," which tells of what happens when the corpse of a beautiful but gigantic man washes ashore on a beach "five miles to the north-west of the city." The local Lilliputians find cheap but inventive ways of desecrating and disfiguring the body before cutting it up for souvenirs and finally rendering it down in big vats. One might characterize this as the microcosmically ideal

Ballard was ecstatic at the news of the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an emotion that makes him practically unique among postwar literati.

Ballard fantasy, in that it partakes of the surreal—the “Gulliver” being represented as a huge flesh statue based on the work of Praxiteles—as well as of the Freudian: “as if the mutilation of this motionless colossus had released a sudden flood of repressed spite.” In the pattern of many other stories, the narrator adopts the tone of a pathologist dictating a detached report of gross anatomy. A single phrase, *colossal wreck*, is a borrowing from Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” which may be the closest that Ballard ever came to a concession to the Romantic school.

Another and nearer literary source is provided by the name—Traven—of the solitary character in “The Terminal Beach.” This is one of two tales—the other being “One Afternoon at Utah Beach”—in which Ballard makes an imaginarium out of the ruined scapes of World War II. Like his modern but vacant cities full of ghostly tower blocks (he is obsessed with towers of all sorts) and abandoned swimming pools, the Pacific and Atlantic beaches, still covered by concrete blocks and bunkers, furnish the ideal setting for a Ballardian wasteland. The beach in the first story has the additional advantage of having been the site of an annihilating nuclear test. The revenant shapes of long-dead Japanese and Germans are allowed a pitiless flicker before their extinction.

Ballard is not the most quotable of authors, because he takes quite a long time to set a scene and because his use of dialogue is more efficient than it is anything else. But he can produce arresting phrases and images. He is especially observant about eyes. On succeeding pages of “The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D,” we find that “memories, caravels without sails, crossed the shadowy deserts of her burnt-out eyes” and that the dwarf, Petit Manuel, regards this same woman “with eyes like crushed flowers.” This entire story is infused with an eerie beauty, as the wings of gliders carve marvels out of the cumulus, and one aesthetic pilot “soared around the cloud, cutting away its tissues. The soft fleece fell toward us in a cool rain.” The cruel capricious beauty who becomes the wealthy patron of this art is careless of the human cost it may entail: “In her face the diagram of bones formed a geometry of murder.”

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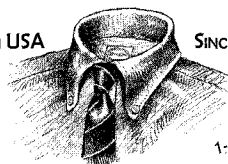
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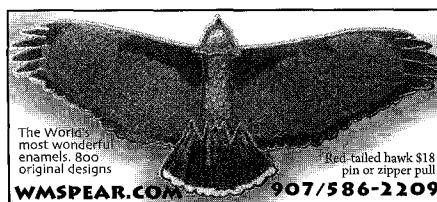
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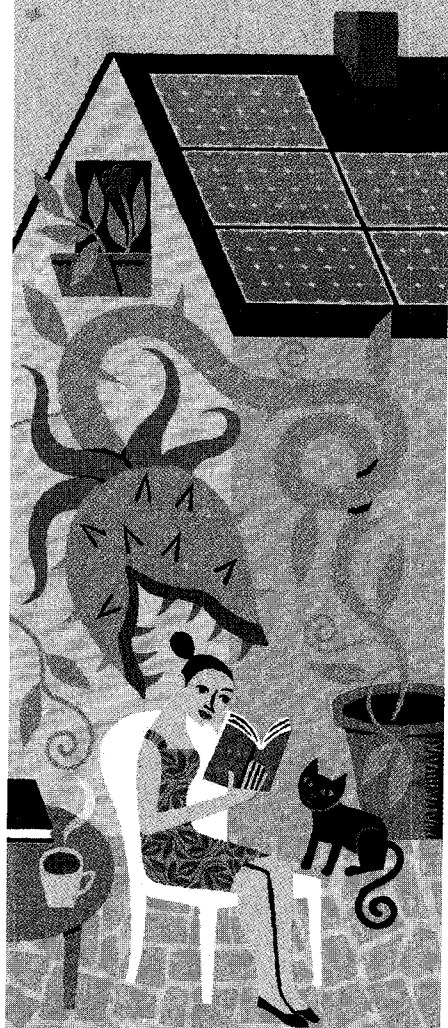
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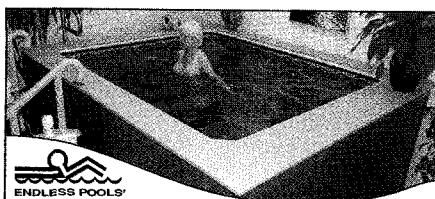
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Ballard wrote his heart out, especially after the random death of his beloved wife left him to raise three children, so I don't especially like to say that he wrote too much. (This book has almost 1,200 pages.) But some of the stories are in want of polish and finish. In "The Last World of Mr. Goddard," a department-store supervisor keeps a microcosm of his town, complete with live-action human figures, in a box in his safe at home. Each evening, he can watch what everybody is doing and use the knowledge the next day. At first I was surprised that he never exploited this advantage to observe anybody having sex, and then I noticed that Ballard had oddly deprived his minutely supervised miniatures of the power to be overheard, so that Mr. Goddard actually had no idea what was going on. Like a movie that is only part talkie, this scenario is leached of its initial power. In compensation, several of the stories are pure *jeu d'esprit*, where the charm of the conceit hardly requires any suggestion of the sinister or the doomed. Despite the menacing title of "Prima Belladonna," the first of the collection, one is immediately bewitched by the very idea of a flower shop where the gorgeously different blooms are all live stand-ins for musicians and opera singers (such as a "delicate soprano mimosa") and where the owner of this hard-to-manage "chloro florist" establishment eventually confronts "an audio-vegetative armageddon."

If this innocuous environment could not deflect Ballard from his insistence on apocalypse in familiar surroundings, it is hardly startling to find that his penultimate tale is titled "The Secret Autobiography of J. G. B." For most of his life, our great specialist in catastrophe made his home in the almost laughably tranquil London suburb of Shepperton, the sheltered home of the British movie studios. He obviously relished the idea of waking one day to find himself the only human being on the planet, to explore a deserted London and cross a traffic-free Thames, to pillage gas stations and supermarkets and then to drive contentedly home. "B was ready to begin his true work." ■

Christopher Hitchens is an Atlantic contributing editor and a Vanity Fair columnist.



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COVER TO COVER

A Guide to Additional Releases



Noah's Compass

Anne Tyler

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Tyler hits every note squarely in this novel about meeting life head-on. Liam Pennywell, middle-class Baltimorean, sharp of thought though mild of tongue, has been drifting along in steady retreat since he was a young man. Because this is Tyler's world, he copes with stoic irony, rather than succumbing to despair. At 60, however, having reached a nadir—he loses his job teaching fifth-grade history at a second-rate school and moves from his substantial place to a “rinky-dink starter apartment”—he gets a do-over. The means is entirely Tyler-esque: quirky, unexpected, entertaining, and involving an eccentric but stubbornly purposeful woman. And the result, a believable mix of satisfaction and

regret, of progress that doesn't erase the setbacks that have come before, is worthy of this mistress of her craft.

Just Like Us

Helen Thorpe

SCRIBNER

In this, her first book, Thorpe, an accomplished journalist, vividly chronicles the coming-of-age of four Mexican American teenagers in Colorado. The young women struggle to reconcile an elusive American dream with the irony of their situations—only two of them have immigration papers, an invisible distinction that sets them at odds with one another and with the nation they consider home. The author, drawn into the tumultuous world of the girls and their families, sees her relationship with her subjects complicated when an illegal immigrant murders a local

police officer, ensnaring Thorpe's husband, who is the mayor of Denver, in a political maelstrom. Thorpe's dual vantage point affords her insight into the loyalties—familial, cultural, financial—that color American perspectives on immigration, and she presents them here with measured compassion. By casting the girls' experiences, and her own, against the larger policy debate, Thorpe personalizes an often generalized problem, and delves into questions of opportunity and identity to examine the “intersection between the terrible mystery of our being” and the “inevitably flawed fashion” in which we govern ourselves.

A Gate at the Stairs

Lorrie Moore

KNOPF

This highly praised and widely anticipated bildungsroman has an undisciplined plot—it's set after 9/11, so why not throw in a terrorist boyfriend (people aren't always what they seem, get it?)—contrived situations (what prospective adoptive mother would want her prospective college-girl nanny to accompany her on interviews with birth mothers?), and many brilliantly tedious pages intended to show that people are tedious when talking about racism or about their feelings when their boyfriends ditch them. Perhaps Moore means to suggest that much of life does, in fact, hover on the edge of the surreal: Who can believe the terrible things that happen? Moore deploys her justly celebrated wit relentlessly, to an effect that is sometimes exhilarating, often entertaining, and more than occasionally irritating; but the wordplay also continually reminds the reader that the world on the page is not real. Still, the sense of irredeemable loss at the end is true enough and persistent. This is not a great novel, but it has pieces of one. ■

The Atlantic Monthly (ISSN 1072-7825) is published monthly except for combined issues in January/February and July/August by The Atlantic Monthly Group, 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037 (202-266-6000). Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., Toronto, Ont., and additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Subscription queries: Atlantic Customer Care, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235 (or call 800-234-2411). Privacy: we make portions of our customer list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services we believe you may enjoy. If you do not want to receive this information, please write to the Customer Care address above. Advertising (212-284-7647) and Circulation (202-266-7197): 600 New Hampshire Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20037. Subscriptions: one year \$39.95 in the U.S. and poss., add \$8.00 in Canada, includes GST (123209926); add \$15.00 elsewhere. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement 41385014. Canada return address: The Atlantic, P.O. Box 1051, Fort Erie, ON L2A 6C7. Back issues: send \$7.50 per copy to The Atlantic, Back Issues, 1900 Industrial Park Dr., Federalsburg, MD 21632 (or call 410-754-8219). Vol. 305, No. 1, January/February 2010. Copyright © 2010, by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved. Postmaster: Send address changes to Atlantic Address Change, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235.

Paul Fredrick

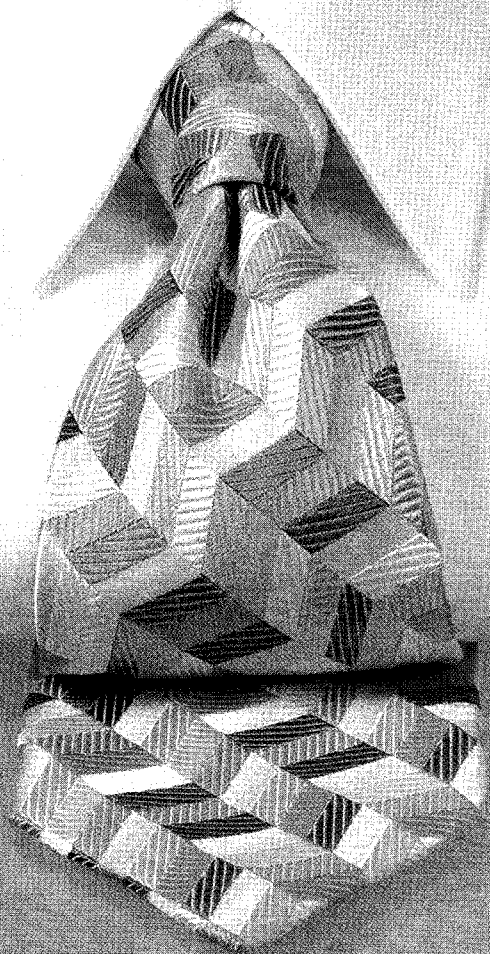
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WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

By Jeffrey Goldberg

What happens to my e-mail accounts when I die?

T. C., Kansas City, Mo.

Dear T. C.,

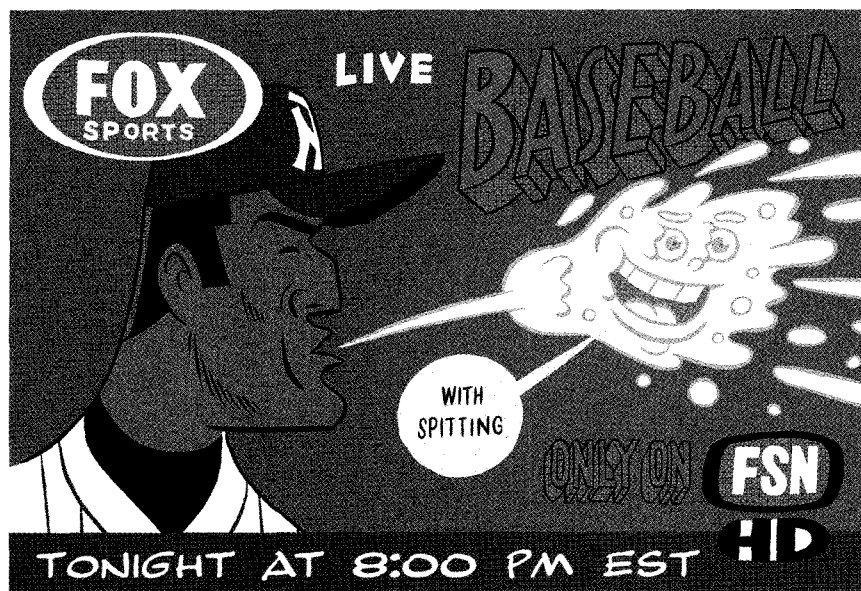
If you suspect that you're going to die soon, I suggest that you print out important correspondence, or share your password with a loved one. If you have a Yahoo e-mail account, no one will be allowed access to it, so your contacts will have to be notified of your death some other way; the company will permanently delete your e-mails when it receives a death certificate. Gmail is a bit more generous. Your legal representative will be allowed access to your account when proof of death is provided. AOL also transfers the e-mail account to your designated representative upon receipt of a death certificate. The new user will have the option of sending out a death notice, or simply deleting the account. Individual companies have different policies, of course. When we die here at *The Atlantic*, our e-mails and other forms of electronic communication are collated, bound, and offered for sale to the general public. I highly recommend such works as *The Collected Facebook Postings of Henry James* (in nine volumes—he updated his page constantly); *Harriet Beecher Stowe Tweets the Great Contest Which Still Absorbs the Attention and Engrosses the Energies of the Nation*; and, of course, *Thoreau's BlackBerry*.

I have always enjoyed watching baseball on TV, and as a Yankees fan, I found the last World Series very satisfying. But maybe it's because I am getting older (I just turned 40) and have become picky or sensitive, but all the spitting in baseball is really getting to me. Is it just me, or is there more spitting than ever? It's going to ruin my appreciation of the game.

R. S., New York, N.Y.

Dear R. S.,

I can't imagine that the amount of spitting in baseball has increased dramatically over the years—I doubt that Alex Rodriguez spits more than Ty Cobb. The



key difference between now and then: high-definition television. I'm guessing you watched the World Series on a 42-inch plasma HD screen. This was a mistake. Everything looks worse in HD, especially spit. Get yourself a small, bad television. Or better yet, a radio.

Sometimes when we're driving somewhere and silent for a while, my husband will turn to me and ask, "What are you thinking about?"

What should I say?

P. D., Madison, Wis.

Dear P. D.,

Good question. Here are a few possible responses:

1. "I was just thinking about how great you look in sweatpants."
2. "I was just wondering whether it would be possible to have sex in the car right now."
3. "I was just wondering whether it would be possible to have sex while watching a football game on television."
4. "I was just thinking that I'd love to see your baseball-card collection from when you were 10."
5. "I was just thinking that it is totally unfair of me to expect you to be interested in my emotions."
6. "I was just thinking that we should probably hire a Swedish au pair."

Do you have a contract with *The Atlantic*? Your column, *What's Your Problem?*, is witless. It's stupid. It doesn't belong in *The Atlantic*. Is the magazine legally obligated to publish it?

D. R., San Bernardino, Calif.

Dear D. R.,

The Atlantic is, in fact, legally obligated to publish this column. I am prohibited from discussing exactly why because of a gag order imposed by one of several judges in a long-running civil dispute. I am allowed to tell you that the case is being heard by both the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., and the Court of Appeals of the Cayman Islands. Without going into detail, I can say that this struggle concerns the disposition of the estate of Leona Helmsley; accounting irregularities at the Uzbek national oil company, Uzbekneftegaz; the Mexican drug cartel La Familia Michoacana; Philippe de Montebello; the First National Savings and Loan Association of Lagos; and former Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao. Once the case is resolved, rest assured that *The Atlantic* will resume regular programming in this space. ■

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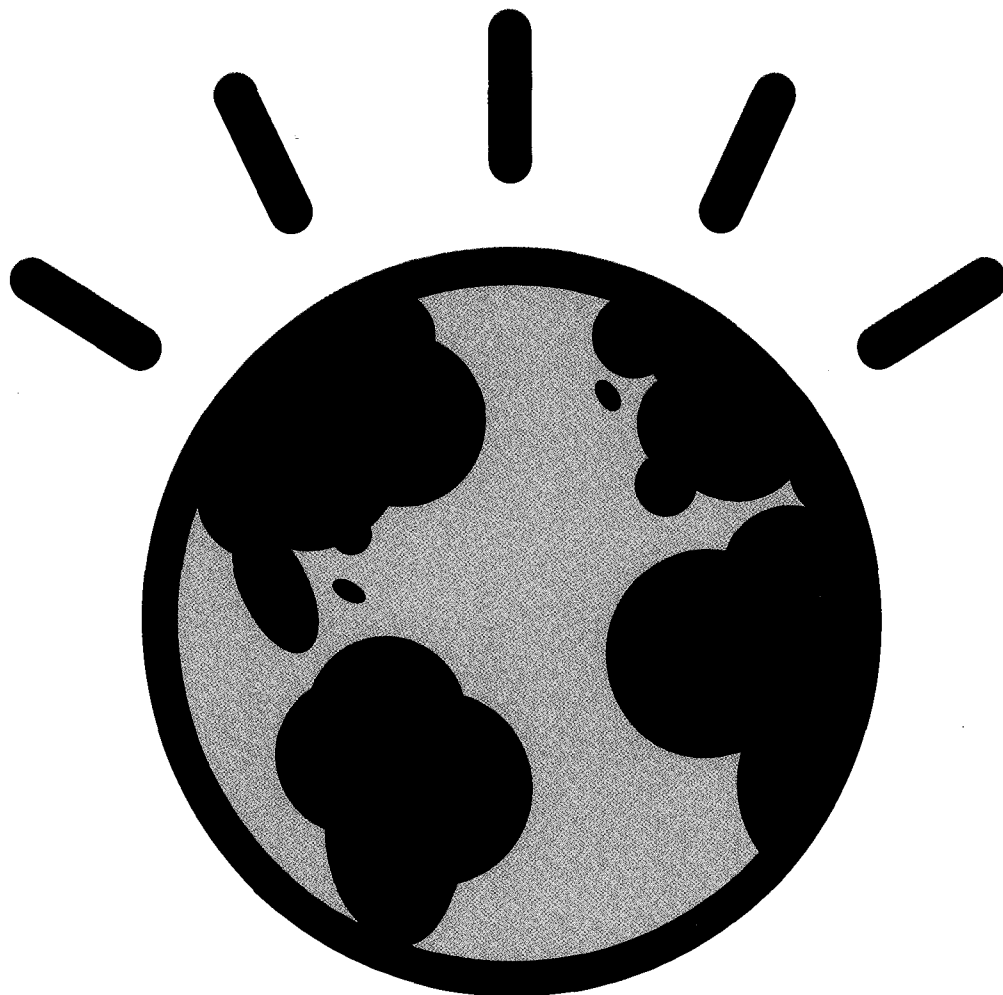
Police departments are correlating street-level information from myriad observations and devices to identify crime patterns – helping prevent crime, rather than simply punishing it.

The list is long, and the transformation is just beginning. Its benefits will be reaped not only by large enterprises, but also by mid-sized and small companies – the engines of economic growth everywhere – and by individuals and communities around the world.

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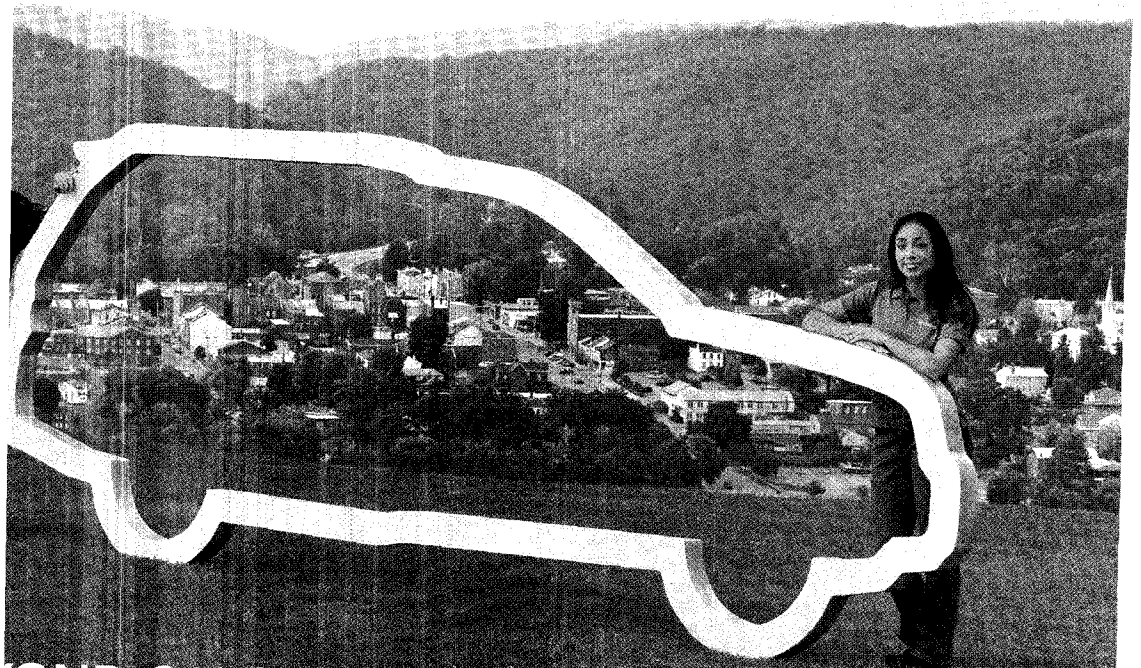
The opportunity is before us, and the moment will not last forever. Will we seize it? As we look to stimulate our economies and rebuild our infrastructure, will we simply repair what's broken? Or will we prepare for a smarter future?

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